Shadows of the Heart

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/76002566.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	人渣反派自救系统 - 墨香铜臭 | The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù
Relationships:	Luo Binghe/Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu/Tianlang-jun
Characters:	Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe, Tianlang-jun, Zhuzhi-lang, Lao Gongzhu | Old Palace Master, Shang Qinghua, Mobei-jun
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Misunderstandings, Kidnapping, Shen Quingqiu makes fanart, Tianlang-jun Being Tianlang-jun, Mutual Pining, Without a Cure (Scum Villain), Fake/Pretend Relationship (kind of?), Jealous Luo Binghe, Totally Made Up Array Theory, Pocket Dimensions Work Like This Now, Author Made Up Array Mechanics And Hopes You Don't Notice, Implied Sexual Content, Fade to Black, Dual Cultivation is the Cure to Everything (Scum Villain), Dual Cultivation (Off Screen), Implied/Referenced Dual Cultivation, Canon-Typical Violence, Obsessive Behavior, But you already knew that about Binghe, Crack Treated Seriously, Crack and Angst, BingQiu is Endgame
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Shadows of the Heart
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-19 Completed: 2026-02-12 Words: 97,444 Chapters: 23/23

Shadows of the Heart

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Summary

Binghe discovers a room full of secret art dedicated to a mysterious man. Oh no, who is he? Is Shizun's heart taken?

AKA: Shen Qingqiu uses his cultivator-level skills to make secret fan art that doesn't stay secret. Misunderstandings lead to chaos, kidnapping, and one very jealous demon emperor.

Notes

This fic was heavily inspired by the writing style and emotional depth of "He was Made for Untidy Rooms and Rumpled Beds" by Bluethursday, along with a couple of little worldbuilding nuggets that have become my headcanon. If you enjoy the internal monologue style and blend of angst and humor of this story, please go read their work! It's absolutely beautiful and I hoped to capture even a fraction of that magic.

This story features: misunderstandings of catastrophic proportions resulting from Shen Qingqiu's secret fanart collection, Shang Qinghua being so done with everything, and one (1) dual cultivation scene that happens entirely off-screen because I have no idea how to write that. Fair warning: I made up approximately 90% of the array mechanics in this fic. Basically, the arrays work because I said so and also because the plot needed them to.

Content notes: Implied/referenced sexual content (off-page), Without a Cure poison (canon), brief violence, and several characters experiencing the worst timing in their lives.

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy!

- Inspired by He Was Made For Untidy Rooms and Rumpled Beds by Bluethursday

Chapter 1: The Hidden Alcove

Shen Yuan had many feelings regarding his recent and most unprecedented shift into a new life and body. Most of them were variations on the theme of: *What the actual fuck, Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky?*

Like, okay, fine, transmigrating into a stallion novel was one thing. Transmigrating into the body of the cannon fodder scum villain destined to be carved up like a holiday turkey by the blackened protagonist? That was quite another. The learning curve had been steep—cultivation techniques, peak lord meetings, proper hair arrangement (seriously, who knew there were only so many acceptable ways to tie up one's hair as a peak lord?), how many layers of clothes were appropriate (ranging from formal, casual, to outright slutty), and winging it through social interactions that would have given him panic attacks pre-transmigration.

Shen Qingqiu—no, Shen Yuan wearing Shen Qingqiu's face like an ill-fitting coat—had been managing. Surviving. Even, dare he say it, occasionally thriving in his new life as Peak Lord of Qing Jing Peak.

What he had *not* been managing was his complete and utter lack of hobbies.

Back in his old life, he'd had his forums, his online arguments about plot holes, his collection of Luo Binghe figurines that he definitely did not keep in a special cabinet with mood lighting. Here? He had...paperwork. Disciple management. More paperwork. The occasional demon beast that needed stabbing. Tea ceremonies that went on for three hours and accomplished nothing except giving him a cramp in his ass from kneeling on those damn floor cushions.

The problem was that in this world, going outside meant encountering things that wanted to eat you. The grass was often carnivorous. And the sky occasionally rained blood during demonic incursions, which really put a damper on any outdoorsy hobbies.

So Shen Qingqiu had turned to art.

It had started innocently enough. He'd been doodling in the margins of a particularly boring sect report about optimal medicinal herb rotation schedules. Just little sketches, nothing fancy. A warrior's profile here, a dramatic cape there. Definitely not sketches of a certain fluffy-haired protagonist in his future glory.

Definitely not.

Except...the thing was, Shen Yuan had always been pretty decent at art. Not professional level or anything, but solid. He'd done all his own designs for his Binghe merchandise back home—custom keychains, embroidered patches, that one truly magnificent body pillow he'd commissioned which had cost him two months' allowance and his dignity.

And now he had *time*. He had *space*. He had cultivation-enhanced fine motor control and access to the best art supplies money could buy.

He had a problem.

The alcove had been the original Shen Qingqiu's doing, actually. A hidden space behind a false panel in the bamboo house, probably used for storing blackmail material or evidence of the original goods' various crimes. Shen Yuan had discovered it during his second week in this body while trying to figure out where the hell the original kept his important documents.

It had been empty, dusty, and utterly perfect.

Now, six months later, it was...less empty.

"This is fine," Shen Qingqiu muttered to himself, carefully adding another layer of glaze to the clay sculpture in front of him. "This is a completely normal and healthy hobby. Lots of people make art. It's therapeutic. It's cultured. I'm—"

He paused, tilting his head to examine his work critically.

The sculpture stared back at him with painted eyes the color of fresh blood, a smirking mouth that promised either complete destruction or deeply athletic sex—possibly both—and a demonic mark that seemed to pulse with malevolent energy even in its clay-rendered form.

Adult Luo Binghe, blackened protagonist edition, in all his terrible glory.

"—absolutely going to get killed if anyone finds out about this," Shen Qingqiu finished weakly.

But he couldn't stop.

It was like an itch in his brain that he couldn't scratch any other way. Back home, he'd had his merch collection. Here, he had...this. His secret gallery of everything Luo Binghe would become. Paintings of the demon emperor standing atop mountains of corpses, his robes billowing dramatically. Sketches of that knowing, dangerous smile that made internet forums explode with thirst. Sculptures capturing the elegant violence of his sword forms.

Shen Qingqiu had become intimately familiar with every angle of Protagonist-Binghe's eventual face, had memorized the exact curve of his nose, could sculpt the flowing lines of that ridiculous hair with his eyes closed.

He was not a creep. He was a *fan*.

A fan who happened to be living with a teenage version of his favorite character, teaching said character to read and cultivate, and absolutely, definitely, *not* grooming him in any way because that would be disgusting and also completely unnecessary since the plot would take care of making Binghe powerful all on its own, thank you very much.

Shen Qingqiu set down his tools and sat back, surveying his work with a critical eye.

The problem—well, one of many problems—was that he was getting *good* at this. Really good. The sculptures looked almost alive, and the paintings...

His fingers twitched toward a canvas propped in the corner. That one had been finished last week, and he was still absurdly proud of it. Luo Binghe in his demon lord regalia, Xin Mo sword across his lap, that particular expression on his face that the novel described as "a king surveying his domain with the satisfaction of one who has conquered everything worth conquering."

Shen Qingqiu had read that passage so many times he'd memorized it. Had discussed it at length on forums. Had written three separate analytical posts about the symbolism of that exact scene.

And now he'd painted it.

A knock at the outer door of his bamboo house made him jolt upright, heart suddenly hammering.

"Shizun?" came a soft, painfully earnest voice. "This disciple has brought fresh tea."

Luo Binghe.

Shit.

"One moment!" Shen Qingqiu called out, already moving to close the alcove. His hands worked quickly, practiced now at concealing his shame (Hobby! It was a hobby, a totally normal hobby!) behind the false panel. A little push here, a slight twist of the frame there, and the wall looked completely ordinary again.

He took a deep breath, smoothing down his robes and attempting to arrange his face into something resembling the aloof, elegant peak lord he was supposed to be.

Not a man who spent his free time creating what was essentially high-quality fanart of his own disciple's future self.

Definitely not that.

"Enter," he called, settling onto a cushion and reaching for the book he'd left open on his low table. Something about spirit herb cultivation. Boring but respectable.

The door slid open and Luo Binghe stepped inside, carrying a tea tray with the kind of focused determination that most cultivators reserved for facing down demon hordes.

Shen Qingqiu felt something in his chest twist.

The Luo Binghe in front of him was still so young. Fifteen, with barely a hint of the devastating looks to come. His hair was fluffy and slightly uneven—he'd recently hit a growth spurt and kept accidentally burning the ends while learning fire-manipulation techniques. His robes were neat but not expensive, the fabric good but clearly mended in places. His face still had that softness to it, that innocent eagerness that the novel had

described being stripped away by trauma after trauma until nothing remained but cold calculation and burning rage.

This Binghe smiled when Shen Qingqiu praised his progress in cultivation. This Binghe teared up when scolded, even though Shen Qingqiu barely raised his voice anymore. This Binghe looked at him like he hung the moon and stars personally.

This Binghe had not yet been pushed into the Endless Abyss. Had not yet watched his seal break and discovered his demonic heritage. Had not yet been betrayed and thrown into literal hell.

This Binghe was still a white lotus.

"Shizun has been working hard," Luo Binghe said softly, setting down the tea tray. His eyes flickered around the room as if searching for something. "This disciple thought Shizun might appreciate fresh jasmine tea. It's good for clearing the mind during long periods of study."

"Thoughtful as always, Binghe," Shen Qingqiu replied, accepting the cup. The tea was perfect, of course. The right temperature, the right strength, served in his favorite cup without him having to ask. Luo Binghe had figured out all his preferences within the first month.

It was endearing and also mildly terrifying.

"Is Shizun studying anything interesting?" Binghe asked, moving to tidy up the already-tidy room with the kind of industrious energy that suggested he was looking for excuses to stay.

"Cultivation theory," Shen Qingqiu replied, which wasn't entirely a lie. "Nothing particularly exciting. What brings you by at this hour? Don't you have sword practice with your martial siblings?"

Something flickered across Binghe's face—frustration, maybe, or resignation. "Ming-shixiong said that since this disciple has already mastered the forms Shizun assigned, there was no need to continue practicing with disciples who are still learning the basics."

Ah. So the other disciples were bullying him again. Indirectly, through Ming Fan's petty authority, but still.

Shen Qingqiu felt his jaw tighten. This was the sort of thing that, in the original novel, the scum villain would have either ignored or actively encouraged. It was part of what pushed Luo Binghe toward his eventual darkness—this constant low-level persecution, the feeling of being isolated and inferior despite his talents.

Well, fuck that noise.

"Ming Fan forgets himself," Shen Qingqiu said coolly. "Practice is not merely about mastering forms—it's about refinement. Even this master still practices basic sword work daily. Tell Ming Fan that this master expects *all* disciples to participate in group practice unless they can best their teacher in a duel. If Ming Fan believes he's qualified for such an exemption, he's welcome to challenge me at any time."

Binghe's eyes went wide, and a smile started to spread across his face—small at first, then growing into something that made Shen Qingqiu's heart squeeze uncomfortably.

"This disciple will relay Shizun's words," Binghe said, and there was definitely satisfaction in his voice now. "Ming-shixiong will surely reconsider his position."

"See that he does." Shen Qingqiu took another sip of tea, using the moment to study his disciple over the rim of his cup. "Your forms are progressing well, but don't let it make you complacent. The moment you think you've mastered something is the moment you stop improving."

"This disciple understands! This disciple will continue working hard to meet Shizun's expectations!"

The enthusiasm was almost painful. Shen Qingqiu wanted to pat his head, ruffle that fluffy hair, tell him he was doing a good job.

He settled for a slight nod instead. Had to maintain some dignity here.

"Is there anything else Shizun needs?" Binghe asked, still hovering. Still looking for reasons to stay.

Yes, Shen Qingqiu thought. Go away so I can go back to making shrine-like monuments to your future coolness in my secret alcove.

"This master is fine," he said aloud. "You may return to your own studies. Weren't you working on that essay about demonic cultivation theory?"

"Already finished!" Binghe said brightly. "This disciple completed it last night and left it on Shizun's desk for review."

Of course he did. Overachiever protagonist. Shen Qingqiu was going to have to actually read that essay now and provide constructive feedback like a real teacher.

"Then perhaps focus on your musical cultivation," Shen Qingqiu suggested. "Your guqin playing could use refinement."

Binghe's face fell slightly. "This disciple...isn't very talented with music."

"Talent is built through practice," Shen Qingqiu replied automatically, then paused. Wait. Musical cultivation was one of the original Shen Qingqiu's specialties. And in the novel, Luo Binghe never really developed his music skills beyond basic competency because the scum villain had deliberately neglected that aspect of his education as part of his overall abuse.

Another small change. Another tiny deviation from the plot.

Would it matter? The System hadn't said anything. No pop-up warnings about point deductions or mandatory plot elements. Maybe this was small enough to slide under the radar.

"If you'd like," Shen Qingqiu heard himself say, "this master could give you private lessons. Musical cultivation is subtle, but powerful when mastered correctly."

The way Binghe's entire face lit up should have been illegal. It was like watching the sun rise. All that golden warmth and radiant joy that made Shen Qingqiu want to look away before he went blind.

"Shizun would teach this disciple personally?" Binghe's voice had gone soft, almost reverent. "This disciple is honored! This disciple will work harder than ever to prove worthy of Shizun's attention!"

"It's not—" Shen Qingqiu started, then stopped. How did one explain that personal attention from one's teacher should be normal, not some special honor? That teachers were *supposed* to help their students? "Just...come by tomorrow evening. We'll start with basic theory."

"Yes, Shizun! This disciple will be there! Thank you, Shizun!"

Binghe bowed deeply—too deeply, really, for such a small thing—and then practically floated toward the door. He paused at the threshold, looking back with an expression of such pure happiness that Shen Qingqiu felt something crack in his chest.

"This disciple is very fortunate to have such a kind and wise teacher," Binghe said softly. "This disciple will never forget Shizun's care."

Then he was gone, sliding the door shut behind him with careful precision.

Shen Qingqiu sat very still for a long moment, staring at the closed door.

With a sigh, Shen Qingqiu set down his teacup and stood, moving back toward the alcove. He should probably just go to bed. It was late, he had administrative meetings tomorrow, and he'd already spent three hours working on that sculpture.

His hands were already working the hidden mechanism before he'd fully made the decision to continue.

The panel slid open, revealing his secret collection once more. Paintings lined the back wall, carefully stacked and separated by silk cloth to prevent damage. Sculptures occupied a small shelf, each one capturing a different aspect of the adult Luo Binghe from the novel.

In the center, on its own pedestal, sat his current work-in-progress. The one he'd been glazing when Binghe knocked.

Shen Qingqiu reached for his tools.

Just one more hour, he promised himself. Just a little more work on the shading around the eyes. Then he'd stop. Definitely.

Behind him, completely unnoticed, a small gap had appeared where the panel hadn't quite closed all the way. A gap just wide enough for someone to see through, if they happened to be walking past at the right moment.

But Shen Qingqiu didn't notice. He was already lost in his work, carefully adding highlights to painted irises, trying to capture that exact shade of demonic red that he'd read about so many times.

In his focus, he also didn't notice the small notification that flickered in the corner of his vision—invisible to anyone without System access.

[WARNING: PLOT DEVIATION DETECTED. MONITORING SITUATION.]

Luo Binghe did not walk away from his Shizun's bamboo house.

He should have. He'd delivered the tea, received his Shizun's acknowledgment, been given clear dismissal. A proper disciple would return to his own quarters and spend the evening in meditation or study.

But Luo Binghe had never been particularly proper, and recently he'd discovered that he had even less interest in propriety than before.

Because the thing was—the *thing* that kept him awake at night and made his chest feel tight and his thoughts spiral into dangerous places—was that Shizun was being *nice* to him.

Not just nice. Kind. Thoughtful. Protective.

The Shizun who had once beaten him with a ruler for minor infractions now barely raised his voice. The Shizun who had forced him to kneel in the cold for hours as punishment now made sure he had warm clothes and proper meals. The Shizun who had seemed to hate his very existence now offered personal lessons and defended him against Ming Fan's petty cruelties.

Luo Binghe didn't understand it. The change had been sudden—happening almost overnight, a few months ago—and while his martial siblings seemed to simply accept it as their Shizun "maturing" or "growing wise with age," Binghe couldn't stop analyzing every interaction, searching for the explanation.

Was this a test? Some complicated scheme? A way to make him lower his guard before some devastating punishment?

Or—and this was the thought that made Binghe's heart race and his hands shake—was Shizun simply being himself? Was this who his teacher truly was, beneath the cold exterior?

The possibility made Binghe feel like he was falling. Like the ground had disappeared beneath his feet and he was tumbling through space with nothing to catch him.

Because if Shizun was kind, if Shizun was warm, if Shizun actually *cared* about his disciples...

If Shizun cared about *him*...

Binghe's chest hurt just thinking about it. A sweet, aching pain that he didn't have words for. That he didn't dare examine too closely because he was just a disciple, just a student, just a boy from the streets who got lucky enough to join a cultivation sect, and he had no right to these feelings that kept growing stronger every day.

He should leave. He should go back to his room like a good disciple.

Instead, Luo Binghe found himself circling back around the bamboo house, moving with the quiet stealth that his washerwoman mother had taught him—how to move through spaces without being noticed, how to make himself small and unobtrusive.

He told himself he just wanted to make sure Shizun was alright. That the tea had been satisfactory. That nothing was needed.

That was a lie, but Luo Binghe was getting good at lying to himself.

The bamboo house had several windows, all currently shut against the evening chill. But Luo Binghe knew from his many cleaning sessions exactly which shutters didn't quite close all the way. Knew which gaps offered views into which rooms.

It was information he'd collected unconsciously, filing it away without really thinking about why.

Now he was grateful for it.

Moving carefully, Luo Binghe positioned himself near one of the side windows—the one that looked into Shizun's main study area. The gap between shutter and frame was narrow, but enough to see inside if he positioned himself just right.

Shizun was there, still sitting at his low table. For a moment, Binghe thought he was still reading that book about spirit herbs.

Then Shizun stood, moving toward a section of wall that looked completely ordinary. Binghe watched, curious, as his teacher did... something. Pressed something? The angle wasn't quite right to see exactly what, but suddenly a section of the wall was sliding open, revealing...

Darkness. A space behind the wall.

A hidden room.

Binghe's heart began to pound. What was Shizun hiding? Was this where he kept his important sect documents? Dangerous cultivation manuals? Secret treasures?

He watched as Shizun disappeared into the hidden space. There was a soft sound—flint striking, perhaps—and then warm light bloomed from within.

Lamplight. Illuminating something that Binghe couldn't quite see from his angle.

He needed to get closer.

Moving with painful slowness, Binghe crept around the side of the house, looking for a better vantage point. There—another window, on the other side. If he could just...

The view was better here. Not perfect—the angle was still awkward and the lamplight inside cast dancing shadows—but enough to see inside the revealed alcove.

And what Luo Binghe saw made his breath catch in his throat.

Art. The hidden space was full of art.

Even from this distance, even in the uncertain light, Binghe could make out paintings lining the walls. Sculptures sitting on shelves. All of them seemed to depict the same subject—a figure with long, dark hair and a commanding presence that seemed to radiate power even from clay and canvas.

A man. A beautiful, powerful-looking man.

Who was this person? Why did Shizun have so much art of him? Why was it hidden away like a precious secret?

Binghe watched as Shizun picked up one of the clay sculptures with hands so gentle it made something twist in his stomach. Watched as his teacher's face softened into an expression Binghe had never seen before—something fond, almost tender.

The way someone might look at something precious.

Something loved.

From this distance, Binghe couldn't make out all the details of the figure. The night shadows and lamplight made it difficult to see clearly. But what he could see was enough: elaborate robes that suggested high status, a posture that spoke of confidence and command, features that even rendered in clay seemed to exude an otherworldly appeal.

Whoever this person was, they were important. Special.

Someone had captured Shizun's heart.

The realization hit Binghe like a physical blow. He felt his chest constrict, his throat close up.

He thought about the way Shizun sometimes looked at him—assessing, thoughtful, like he was searching for something. Someone?

Was this why Shizun had been kinder lately? Did Binghe remind him of this person somehow? Was every gentle word, every patient explanation, every small kindness just Shizun seeing shadows of someone else in his worthless disciple's face?

The thought made him feel sick. Made him feel like he was being torn in half.

Because if that was true, then nothing was really for *him*. It was all for the ghost of whoever this person was. Someone Shizun truly cared for, truly wanted, while Binghe was just...

Just a replacement. A pale substitute for the real thing.

He watched as Shizun carefully worked on the sculpture, his movements practiced and sure, full of obvious care. Watched as his teacher—the man Binghe had started to foolishly, desperately care for—poured his attention into creating monuments to someone else.

Tears began to blur Binghe's vision. He scrubbed at them angrily with the back of his hand.

He had no right to cry. Had no right to feel hurt or betrayed. Shizun didn't belong to him. Had never been his. Would never be his.

But knowing that didn't make it hurt any less.

Luo Binghe forced himself to turn away from the window before he was discovered. His feet carried him blindly away from the bamboo house, his vision still blurred with tears. He didn't know where he was going. Didn't care. Just needed to move, needed to get away before he did something stupid like storm inside and demand answers he had no right to ask for.

He should go back to his room. Should meditate, center himself, lock these feelings away where they couldn't hurt him.

Instead, he found himself in one of the more remote areas of the peak—a place where few disciples ventured. A small clearing surrounded by bamboo, the kind of space that was good for training or thinking or falling apart where no one could see.

Binghe sank to his knees, his hands fisting in his robes over his chest where his heart felt like it was being crushed.

Who was the man in those paintings? Where was he now? Why did Shizun keep his image hidden away like that?

Did Shizun still love him?

The questions circled in his mind like hungry ghosts, tearing at him. He hadn't been able to see the figure clearly enough to understand who it might be. Some powerful cultivator perhaps? A former martial brother? Someone from Shizun's past?

The not knowing was almost worse than knowing would be. His imagination filled in the gaps with increasingly devastating possibilities. Someone strong. Someone worthy. Someone everything that Binghe was not.

"I'll find out," Binghe whispered to the darkness, his voice rough with tears and determination. "I'll discover who you are and why Shizun has you in his heart. Because one day, I'll be in that place."

He didn't know how yet. Didn't know what it would take.

But Luo Binghe had never been one to give up. Had survived the streets, survived his mother's death, survived bullying, survived the harsh training of the cultivation world through sheer stubborn will.

He would survive this too. Would become something magnificent, something that demanded attention.

He would make Shizun *see* him.

The tears kept falling, but Binghe's jaw was set. His hands stopped shaking.

He would find a way back into that alcove. Would study those artworks more closely, search for clues about the mysterious figure's identity. He'd discover who had stolen his Shizun's heart.

And then... then he would find a way to win it for himself.

Behind him, in a bamboo house across the peak, Shen Qingqiu carefully placed his newest sculpture on its shelf, completely unaware of the catastrophic misunderstanding that had just been born.

Completely unaware that his innocent hobby had just planted the first seed of an obsession that would reshape his disciple's entire world.

The System, which had been monitoring the situation, sent up a quiet alert:

[MINOR PLOT DEVIATION DETECTED] [PROTAGONIST EMOTIONAL STATE: HEIGHTENED INTEREST] [MONITORING SITUATION]

But Shen Qingqiu, having dismissed his System notifications hours ago so he could focus on his art in peace, saw nothing.

He hummed softly to himself as he worked, already planning his next piece. Maybe a painting this time, something capturing the dramatic moment when Binghe first obtained Xin Mo in the novel.

That scene had been *chef's kiss* levels of perfection. Shen Qingqiu wanted to do it justice.

In the clearing across the peak, Luo Binghe finally stood, wiping his face clean. His eyes held a new determination—something sharper than the innocent devotion that had been there before, though not yet hardened into anything darker.

He began walking back toward his quarters, his mind already racing with questions he had no answers for.

Tomorrow, he would find an excuse to clean Shizun's study again. Would search for clues. Would try to understand who had captured his teacher's heart so completely that Shizun would spend hours crafting monuments to his memory.

And maybe—just maybe—Binghe would find a way to become someone worthy of that same devotion.

Chapter 2: A Gallery of Ghosts

Luo Binghe had always been a diligent disciple.

It was one of the few things he could control in a life that had been largely defined by circumstances beyond his influence—his birth, his mother's death, the cruelty of his peers. But diligence? That was his. Hard work, attention to detail, the careful observation of everything around him so that he could anticipate needs and avoid punishments—these were skills honed by necessity and sharpened by devotion.

But in the three days since he'd discovered the hidden alcove, diligence had taken on a new, consuming quality that felt less like virtue and more like madness.

He couldn't stop thinking about it. About *him*. The mysterious figure in those paintings and sculptures, rendered with such obvious care and affection that it made Binghe's chest ache just remembering it.

Who was he? Where was he now? Why did Shizun keep his image hidden away like a treasure too precious—or too painful—to display openly?

The questions chased themselves in circles through Binghe's mind during lessons, during meditation, during the brief moments before sleep when his thoughts should have been settling into peaceful emptiness. Instead, they spiraled and spun, weaving elaborate theories that ranged from the plausible to the absurd.

A former martial brother, perhaps, who had died tragically? That would explain the secrecy, the almost shrine-like quality of the hidden space. But then why would Shizun hide such grief? Wouldn't it be more natural to honor a fallen comrade openly?

A forbidden lover from before Shizun became a peak lord? Someone deemed unsuitable by sect standards, forcing Shizun to love in secret? The romance of it appealed to something in Binghe's heart even as it twisted like a knife in his gut.

Or perhaps—and this thought made him feel slightly sick—perhaps the man was still alive somewhere. Perhaps Shizun still saw him, still loved him, and the alcove was simply a private place to keep his affections safe from prying eyes and wagging tongues.

That possibility was the worst. Because if the man was alive, if Shizun could still reach him...

Then Binghe had no chance at all.

"Luo Binghe!"

Ming Fan's sharp voice cut through his spiraling thoughts like a whip crack. Binghe's head snapped up, realizing with a jolt that he'd completely lost track of the sword form demonstration happening in front of him.

"Sorry, Ming-shixiong," Binghe said quickly, bowing his head in what he hoped looked like appropriate contrition. "This disciple was... distracted."

"Clearly." Ming Fan's lip curled in that particular expression of disdain he reserved for Binghe—though lately it had been tempered somewhat by Shizun's new policy of requiring *all* disciples to participate in group practice. Ming Fan seemed less willing to openly antagonize Binghe when it might result in him having to duel their teacher. "If you're too good for basic instruction, perhaps you'd like to demonstrate the Autumn Leaves Falling form for everyone?"

It was meant to be a punishment, a way to embarrass Binghe in front of the other disciples. Ming Fan likely assumed he hadn't been paying enough attention to replicate the form correctly.

Unfortunately for Ming Fan's plans, Binghe had mastered that particular sequence two weeks ago.

"This disciple would be honored," Binghe said, stepping forward with his practice sword.

The form was a flowing sequence of defensive parries transitioning into counter-strikes, meant to teach disciples how to turn an opponent's aggression against them. Binghe executed it with mechanical precision, his body moving through the positions while his mind continued its obsessive circling.

I need to get back into that alcove, he thought as his sword swept through a rising block. *I need to see those artworks more clearly.*

But how? His sword flowed into a spinning deflection. *Shizun was in his study yesterday evening working on paperwork. The day before he was meeting with the sect leader. When is he away long enough?*

The final movement of the form—a sharp downward strike that would theoretically disarm an opponent—came naturally. Binghe held the ending pose for a breath before straightening, looking to Ming Fan for acknowledgment.

His martial brother's face had gone slightly sour. "Adequate," Ming Fan said shortly. "Though your footwork on the third transition was sloppy. Again."

Binghe bit back a sigh and returned to the starting position. At least the repetitive movement gave him something to do with his body while his mind continued to spin with ideas.

The opportunity came that evening in the form of a summons.

"Binghe," Shizun said as Binghe delivered the evening tea. "This master has been called to a peak lords' meeting. It may run late into the night—apparently Qi Qingqi and Wei Qingwei

are having another dispute about resource allocation and everyone must suffer through it."

There was a slight note of resigned humor in Shizun's voice that made Binghe's heart squeeze. These little moments of personality, of Shizun being something other than the distant, perfect peak lord—Binghe treasured them like pearls.

"Would Shizun like this disciple to wait up?" Binghe asked. "In case Shizun requires anything upon returning?"

"No need." Shizun waved a hand dismissively, already gathering papers into his qiankun pouch. "Binghe should get a full night's rest. Tomorrow we'll be working on musical cultivation theory, and this master expects his disciples to be alert."

Tomorrow. Binghe's pulse quickened at the thought—his first private lesson with Shizun, something he'd been looking forward to with an eagerness that felt almost painful.

But tonight...

Tonight Shizun would be gone for hours. The bamboo house would be empty.

"This disciple understands," Binghe said, bowing. "This disciple hopes the meeting concludes swiftly."

"Unlikely, but appreciated." Shizun paused at the door, glancing back. Something flickered across his face—an expression Binghe couldn't quite read. Concern, maybe? "Binghe has seemed... distracted lately. Is everything alright?"

The question caught Binghe off-guard. His heart lurched into his throat, sudden panic flaring. Did Shizun know? Had he noticed Binghe lurking around the bamboo house? Had he somehow discovered—

"This disciple is well," Binghe managed, forcing his voice to remain steady. "Perhaps just... eager to learn musical cultivation. This disciple has been thinking about tomorrow's lesson."

It wasn't even entirely a lie. He *had* been thinking about the lesson—in between thinking about everything else.

Shizun's expression softened into something that might have been fondness. "Diligent as always. Very well. Rest well, Binghe."

Then he was gone, the door sliding shut behind him with a soft whisper of wood on wood.

Binghe stood frozen for a long moment, listening to the sound of Shizun's footsteps fading away down the path. His heart was hammering so hard he could feel it in his throat, in his fingertips, in every nerve of his body.

He should go back to his own quarters. Should meditate, or study, or practice his sword forms. Should do literally anything other than what he was about to do.

But he was already moving toward the wall where he'd seen the panel open. Already reaching out with trembling fingers to press and prod at the seemingly solid surface, searching for the mechanism that would reveal the hidden space.

Nothing happened.

Binghe tried again, pressing harder. Then softer. Then in different patterns—one press here, two there, a sliding motion that proved fruitless.

The wall remained stubbornly solid.

Frustration bubbled up in his chest, hot and bitter. He'd been so certain he'd seen where Shizun had pressed. But the angle had been bad, and the lighting uncertain, and maybe he'd been wrong about the exact spot—

Wait.

Binghe forced himself to step back, to think. Shizun was careful—meticulous, even. A hidden mechanism wouldn't be obvious, wouldn't be easy to accidentally trigger. It would require specific knowledge, a particular sequence...

Or specific spiritual energy.

The thought struck him like lightning. What if the mechanism required a particular cultivation signature to activate? What if it was keyed specifically to Shizun's spiritual energy?

If that was the case, Binghe had no chance of opening it through normal means.

But Shizun was also practical. What if there was an emergency? What if the bamboo house was on fire, or under attack, and something important was hidden in that alcove? Surely there would be some kind of override, some way to access it even without the proper signature...

Binghe's eyes drifted to the bookshelf nearby. Heavy, solid, but on the kind of iron wheels that allowed it to be moved for cleaning. And positioned, he now realized, directly next to the section of wall where the alcove opened.

What if the mechanism wasn't in the wall itself? What if it was behind the bookshelf?

It took him twenty minutes of careful manipulation to shift the bookshelf enough to see behind it without making obvious scraping marks on the floor. Twenty minutes during which his heart refused to slow down, during which every small sound made him freeze in terror that Shizun had somehow returned early.

But behind the bookshelf, just barely visible in the gap he'd created, was a small indentation in the wall. A finger-sized depression that looked like nothing more than a flaw in the plaster to casual observation.

Binghe pressed it.

For a heart-stopping moment, nothing happened.

Then, with a soft *click* that sounded thunderously loud in the quiet room, a section of wall swung inward.

The alcove.

Binghe's breath caught. His hands were shaking so badly he had to clench them into fists to make them stop. This was wrong. This was such a violation of privacy, of trust, of everything a disciple should be to his master.

But he was already lighting a candle with trembling fingers. Already stepping into the hidden space, drawn forward by a need he didn't fully understand.

The alcove was small—barely large enough for one person to stand comfortably. Shelves lined the walls, and every available surface was occupied by artwork in various stages of completion.

And all of it—*all of it*—featured the same subject.

Up close, with proper lighting, the figure was even more breathtaking than Binghe had imagined.

The paintings showed a man in his prime—perhaps late twenties or early thirties, though something about the way he was rendered suggested he might be older, that age simply sat differently on him. His features were sharp and aristocratic, with high cheekbones and a jaw that could cut glass. Long dark hair flowed past his shoulders in most depictions, though some showed it partially bound back in elaborate styles.

But it was the expression that truly captured Binghe's attention. That knowing, slightly arrogant smirk that suggested this man held secrets and power in equal measure. The tilt of his head that spoke of absolute confidence, of someone who had never doubted his place in the world.

The robes varied between pieces—sometimes austere black, sometimes elaborate crimson and gold, sometimes something in between. But they were always expensive, always perfectly rendered, suggesting wealth and status. In several paintings, the figure held a sword, and even without understanding the specific style, Binghe could tell it was meant to be an exceptional weapon.

One sculpture in particular drew his eye. It showed the figure from the chest up, head tilted slightly as if listening to something. The expression was softer here, less arrogant and more... contemplative? Fond? It made something in Binghe's chest twist painfully.

This was how Shizun saw him. This specific angle, this particular emotion. Something gentle and private, meant only for Shizun's eyes.

Binghe's vision blurred. He scrubbed at his eyes angrily, but the tears kept coming.

He'd been hoping—so foolishly hoping—that seeing the art up close would provide answers. Would give him some clue about who this person was, how Binghe might find him, might compete with him.

Instead, it only raised more questions. And made the reality of the situation that much more painfully clear.

Shizun had loved this man. Maybe still loved him. Loved him enough to spend hours—probably years, given the number of pieces—creating art that captured every angle, every expression, every detail.

How could Binghe possibly compete with that? With a love so deep it manifested in clay and paint and charcoal? With a devotion that required its own secret shrine?

He couldn't.

The realization settled over him like a heavy shroud. He was fifteen, untested, nothing special except for his determination and his desperate, pathetic love for a teacher who would never see him as anything more than a disciple.

A disciple who couldn't even compare to whoever this magnificent figure was.

Binghe's gaze traveled over the paintings again, searching for... something. Anything that might tell him who this person was. But there were no names inscribed, no identifying symbols he recognized. Just the figure himself, rendered in a hundred different ways.

Wait.

Binghe leaned closer to one of the paintings, squinting in the candlelight. There, on the figure's forehead—was that a mark? It was subtle, partially obscured by the way the hair fell, but there seemed to be some kind of design or symbol...

The angle was bad, and the painting style made it hard to see clearly. It might have just been a trick of the light, or an artistic flourish representing a shadow. But the more Binghe looked, the more certain he became that there *was* something there.

Some kind of mark or tattoo or...

A sound from outside the bamboo house made Binghe's heart stop.

Footsteps.

No no no no—

Binghe moved faster than he ever had in his life, blowing out the candle and stumbling out of the alcove in the sudden darkness. His hands fumbled for the hidden mechanism, pressing frantically until he heard that soft *click* of the panel sliding back into place.

The bookshelf—he'd moved the bookshelf—

The front door was opening.

Binghe shoved the bookshelf back with strength born of pure terror, no longer caring about making marks on the floor. He'd barely gotten it into position when the inner door slid open and Shizun stepped inside.

"Binghe?"

Shizun's voice was surprised, confused. Binghe realized with a jolt of horror that he was standing in the middle of Shizun's study, in the dark, probably looking guilty as sin.

"Shizun!" Binghe's voice came out too high, too breathless. He swallowed hard and tried again. "This disciple thought—that is, Shizun said the meeting would run late, so this disciple came to—"

Think, think, what would be a reasonable explanation—

"—to retrieve the music theory texts Shizun mentioned? For tomorrow's lesson? This disciple wanted to review them beforehand, to not waste Shizun's time."

It was thin. So thin. But it was also exactly the kind of eager-student behavior that Shizun had come to expect from him, the kind of over-achieving diligence that sometimes made his teacher smile.

Shizun's expression was hard to read in the dim light filtering through the windows. For a heart-stopping moment, Binghe was certain he'd been caught. That Shizun would see right through his flimsy excuse and demand to know what he'd really been doing.

Then Shizun sighed, and there was a note of something almost... soft in it. "The texts are on the shelf by the door, Binghe. You don't need to search my entire study in the dark."

He moved further into the room, and with a casual gesture, several lamps lit themselves with spiritual energy. Warm light flooded the space, and Binghe had to resist the urge to look toward the bookshelf, toward the wall that hid the alcove.

Did anything look disturbed? Had he left traces? Would Shizun notice?

"This disciple apologizes for the intrusion," Binghe said, bowing deeply. It had the dual benefit of being appropriately respectful and hiding his face while he tried to get his expression under control. "This disciple will retrieve the texts and return to his quarters immediately."

"Mm." Shizun moved toward his desk, already pulling papers from his qiankun pouch. He looked tired, Binghe noticed. The meeting must not have gone well. "The meeting concluded early—Wei Qingwei apparently had another engagement. We'll reconvene tomorrow to continue the arguing."

He paused, glancing at Binghe with an expression that made Binghe's heart squeeze painfully. "You didn't need to prepare quite so eagerly. This master appreciates diligence, but rest is also important for cultivation."

The gentle reprimand, the concern in Shizun's voice—it was almost too much. Binghe felt his eyes start to sting again and blinked rapidly.

"This disciple will remember," he managed. Then, before he could stop himself: "Did the meeting go poorly? Shizun seems tired."

Something flickered across Shizun's face—surprise, maybe, that Binghe had noticed. Then that soft expression again, the one that made Binghe feel like his heart was being squeezed in a gentle fist.

"Just the usual peak lord politics," Shizun said dismissively. "Nothing for Binghe to worry about." He made a shooing motion with one hand. "Go on, retrieve your texts. This master needs to finish this paperwork before sleeping."

Binghe bowed again and moved toward the bookshelf by the door—the *other* bookshelf, the one that didn't hide life-altering secrets. He found the music theory texts easily, tucking them under his arm.

He should leave. Should escape while he still could, before Shizun decided to ask more questions or investigate why the study felt slightly different.

But at the door, he paused. Looked back.

Shizun had settled at his desk, brush already moving across paper with those elegant, efficient strokes. The lamplight caught in his hair, making it shine like spilled ink. His profile was serene, beautiful in that effortless way that made Binghe's chest ache.

And all Binghe could think was: *This is what the man in those paintings sees. This is what Shizun looks like when he's thinking of him.*

"Goodnight, Shizun," Binghe said softly.

Shizun glanced up, and for just a moment, his expression was unguarded. Warm. "Goodnight, Binghe. Sleep well."

Binghe fled before the tears could start again.

Sleep did not come easily that night.

Binghe lay in his small room in the disciples' quarters, staring at the ceiling and trying to process everything he'd seen. Every time he closed his eyes, images from the alcove flashed behind his eyelids. That knowing smirk. Those powerful shoulders. The way the candlelight had played across sculpted features that suggested both danger and allure.

And that mark on the forehead. That strange symbol he hadn't been able to see clearly.

What did it mean? Was it decorative? Symbolic? Part of some clan or sect identification?

Binghe had never been one to give up easily. The streets had taught him that survival often came down to sheer stubborn persistence—if you kept trying, kept pushing, eventually

something would give.

But this felt different. This felt like trying to climb a mountain made of glass, every handhold slipping away before he could gain purchase.

He thought about the sculpture with the gentler expression. About the way Shizun's hands had moved so carefully over his artwork. About the hidden alcove itself, secret and sacred.

Whoever this man was, he'd left a mark on Shizun's heart that Binghe couldn't begin to compete with.

But...

But Shizun had also been kind to him lately. Had offered private lessons. Had defended him against Ming Fan. Had looked at him with something that might have been fondness.

Maybe it was all just good teaching. Maybe Binghe was reading too much into every gentle word and soft expression. Maybe he was just a particularly promising student, nothing more.

Or maybe—and this thought was both hope and agony—maybe Shizun *could* care for him. Eventually. In time. If Binghe became strong enough, accomplished enough, worthy enough.

If he could somehow make Shizun see *him* instead of seeing shadows of whoever this other person was.

The thought crystallized into determination somewhere in the dark hours before dawn. Binghe might not be able to compete with a memory, with a love that required secret shrines and countless hours of artistic devotion.

But he could become someone impossible to overlook. Someone who demanded attention not because he resembled anyone else, but because of who he was in his own right.

He would train harder. Study more. Excel at every task until even Shizun couldn't deny his worth.

And somehow—somehow—he would find out who the mysterious figure was. Would learn everything about him, would understand what had captured Shizun's heart so completely.

Then maybe, just maybe, Binghe could figure out how to capture it too.

It was a desperate plan. Probably doomed to failure. But it was better than giving up. Better than accepting that he would never be more than a disciple, never merit more than professional courtesy and academic interest.

As the first pale light of dawn began to filter through his window, Luo Binghe made himself a promise: He would uncover the truth. He would make himself worthy. He would find a way.

Even if it destroyed him in the process.

Shen Qingqiu returned from his abbreviated peak lords' meeting in a foul mood that had nothing to do with Wei Qingwei's sudden departure and everything to do with the System notification that had popped up halfway through Qi Qingqi's rant about metal-working budgets.

[ALERT: Minor plot deviation detected. Recommend increased monitoring of Hidden Alcove.]

Increased monitoring. Right. Because that was helpful.

Shen Qingqiu had immediately made an excuse about needing to retrieve a document and rushed back to the bamboo house, his heart hammering. If Binghe had found the alcove, if he'd seen the artwork...

But no. When he'd arrived, he'd found Binghe in his study—suspicious, certainly, but with a reasonable explanation about retrieving texts. And when Shen Qingqiu had checked the alcove later (after Binghe left, obviously), everything had been exactly as he'd left it. The panel was closed. The bookshelf was in position. Nothing disturbed.

So what deviation had the System detected?

Chapter 3: The Absent Lover

Binghe fought *beautifully.*

There was no other word for it. At fifteen, Luo Binghe moved like someone who'd been born with a sword in his hand and murder in his heart—all coiled grace and devastating precision. He was still growing into his power, still rough around the edges, but the raw potential there was enough to make Shen Qingqiu's artist's eye itch for charcoal and paper.

The fight ended with Binghe victorious, Elder Tian Chui on his knees, and Sha Hualing watching from the demon ranks with an expression of delighted interest that made Shen Qingqiu's protective instincts flare uncomfortably.

Then Tian Chui moved.

The match was over. The demon had lost. But demons, as it turned out, didn't always accept defeat gracefully—and Tian Chui lunged toward Binghe with those spike-covered arms extended, a creature of pure spite and malice.

Shen Qingqiu didn't think.

His sword was in his hand and then he was *there*, between Binghe and the charging demon, Xiu Ya singing through the air as it pierced Tian Chui's chest.

The demon should have fallen.

The demon did not fall.

Tian Chui's mouth split into something that might have been a smile, blood bubbling at his lips, and he surged forward—impaling himself further on Shen Qingqiu's blade just to get *closer*—and those armor-spikes raked across Shen Qingqiu's side.

The wounds were small. Barely scratches, really.

The poison was not small at all.

"SHIZUN!"

Binghe's voice, cracking with fear. Shen Qingqiu wanted to turn and reassure him—*it's fine, just a scratch, don't worry your pretty head*—but his legs had decided to stop cooperating, and the world was tilting at a very concerning angle.

Tian Chui laughed, even as he collapsed from the sword still buried in his chest. "Without a Cure," he rasped. "The poison is called Without a Cure. Do you understand, little cultivator? There is no—"

Binghe's sword took his head off before he could finish the sentence.

Shen Qingqiu would have found this very satisfying if he weren't in the process of crumpling to the ground. Through the haze of encroaching darkness, he was dimly aware of several things happening at once: Binghe catching him before he hit the dirt, Sha Hualing confirming with something like genuine regret that there really was no antidote, Liu Qingge arriving from somewhere and deflecting what might have been an opportunistic attack.

The demons were retreating. Someone was shouting orders.

And Binghe—Binghe was holding him like he was something precious, something breakable, those big dark eyes swimming with tears.

Shen Qingqiu summoned the last of his strength to raise one hand, patting clumsily at Binghe's head. "Knew you'd win," he managed, and meant it.

The darkness swallowed him whole.

The Without-a-Cure poison entered Shen Qingqiu's system at precisely the moment Luo Binghe's world stopped making sense.

Luo Binghe did not leave his Shizun's side.

For three days and three nights, he sat vigil in the bamboo house, watching the rise and fall of Shen Qingqiu's chest like it was the only thing keeping him tethered to sanity. Mu Qingfang came and went, administering treatments that could only manage the symptoms, not cure them. Yue Qingyuan stopped by with grave eyes and gentle words. Liu Qingge appeared once, left a rare medicinal herb without speaking, and disappeared again.

Binghe barely registered any of it.

All he could see was that moment replaying behind his eyelids every time he blinked: Shizun stepping between him and death. Shizun's face going white as the poison took hold.

Because of him. *For* him.

Binghe's hands trembled where they rested on his knees. He should have been faster. Should have sensed the attack coming. Should have been the one to take those spikes, should have thrown himself in front of Shizun instead of standing there like a useless *fool*—

Shizun stirred in his sleep, a small sound of discomfort escaping his lips.

Binghe was on his feet in an instant, reaching for the fresh cloth he'd prepared, wringing it out and pressing it gently to Shizun's forehead. The fever had spiked again. Mu Qingfang had warned him about this—the poison's effects would flare periodically, causing pain and weakness that would never fully fade.

Never.

That word lodged in Binghe's chest like a splinter, working deeper with every breath.

Shizun would suffer for the rest of his life because Binghe hadn't been strong enough to protect himself. Because Binghe had needed saving. Because Binghe was *weak.*

The tears came without permission, hot and shameful, spilling down his cheeks as he cradled Shizun's limp hand in both of his own. He pressed his forehead to those elegant fingers—the same fingers that had patted his head so gently before Shizun lost consciousness—and wept.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into the darkness. "Shizun, I'm so sorry. This disciple is useless. This disciple couldn't—I couldn't—"

The words dissolved into quiet sobs.

Outside, dawn was breaking over Qing Jing Peak, painting the bamboo grove in shades of gold and rose. But inside the bamboo house, Luo Binghe saw nothing but the pale face of the man he loved, and the terrible knowledge that all of this was his fault.

Shen Qingqiu woke to the sensation of being watched.

This was not, in itself, unusual. He was a Peak Lord, after all, and Peak Lords were frequently subjected to observation by disciples, colleagues, and the occasional demon with poor life choices. What *was* unusual was the intensity of the watching, and the identity of the watcher.

Luo Binghe sat beside his bed, dark eyes fixed on Shen Qingqiu's face with an expression of such desperate hope and aching guilt that Shen Qingqiu's heart did something complicated in his chest.

Oh, he thought. *Oh, this child.*

"Binghe," he rasped, and was rewarded with the sight of his disciple's face crumpling like wet paper.

"Shizun!" Binghe was on his knees before Shen Qingqiu could so much as blink, his forehead pressed to the floor in a kowtow so deep it probably hurt. "This disciple—Shizun, this disciple begs forgiveness. This disciple was blind. This disciple was foolish. This disciple did not understand—"

"Binghe." Shen Qingqiu's voice came out weaker than he'd intended, but it was enough to make the boy pause. "Stop that. Come here."

Binghe raised his head, and Shen Qingqiu's breath caught. The boy looked *wrecked*—eyes red and swollen from crying, face pale from lack of sleep, hair escaping its tie in bedraggled wisps. How long had he been sitting here? How long had he been punishing himself?

"This disciple has misunderstood Shizun all this time," Binghe said, his voice raw. "This disciple thought—but Shizun has always been looking out for this disciple. Shizun protected this disciple. Shizun took that poison for—" His voice cracked. "For *this disciple.*"

Oh, this absolute *idiot child.*

“Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu said again, and when the boy didn’t move, he patted the edge of the bed. “Come. Here.”

Binghe approached like a dog who’d been kicked too many times to trust a gentle hand. He sat on the very edge of the bed, as far from Shen Qingqiu as possible while still technically following instructions.

Shen Qingqiu sighed. His body ached, the poison humming through his meridians like a low-grade fever, but that was a problem for later. Right now, he had a traumatized protagonist to manage.

“You haven’t slept,” he observed.

Binghe’s jaw tightened. “This disciple is not tired.”

“Liar.” The word came out gentler than Shen Qingqiu intended. “You look like a ghost. Have you eaten?”

Silence. Which was answer enough.

“Binghe.” Shen Qingqiu reached out, ignoring the twinge of pain the movement caused, and placed his hand on the boy’s head. “This master took that poison by choice. Not because Binghe is weak, or useless, or whatever other nonsense you’ve been telling yourself. Because this master chose to protect his disciple. Do you understand?”

Binghe’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “This disciple doesn’t deserve—”

“That,” Shen Qingqiu interrupted, “is not for Binghe to decide.” He rubbed his thumb against the boy’s hair in what he hoped was a soothing motion. It was what Binghe had always wanted in the original novel, wasn’t it? Affection. Approval. Someone who gave a damn. “What kind of teacher would I be if I let my student take a poisoned strike when I could prevent it?”

The tears spilled over. Binghe caught Shen Qingqiu’s hand in both of his, pressing it to his cheek as if afraid it would disappear.

“Shizun is too good to this disciple.”

No, Shen Qingqiu thought. The original goods was too terrible to you, and I’m just trying to be a baseline decent human being. But he didn’t say that.

“Binghe should cook something,” he said instead. “This master is hungry.”

The effect was immediate and miraculous. Binghe’s entire demeanor shifted, despair replaced by determined purpose. “Yes! This disciple will—immediately—Shizun must rest, this disciple will prepare—”

“Something light,” Shen Qingqiu called after the boy’s retreating back. “Congee, perhaps. My stomach is—”

Binghe was already gone, a flurry of renewed energy and desperate devotion.

Shen Qingqiu let his head fall back against the pillows and closed his eyes.

【*RELATIONSHIP POINTS INCREASED*】 the System chirped. 【*PROTAGONIST GUILT LEVEL: CRITICAL. DEVOTION LEVEL: ESCALATING. RECOMMEND MONITORING*】

Wonderful. Just wonderful.

But when Binghe returned with a tray of lovingly prepared congee, when those big dark eyes watched him eat with such desperate hope, when the boy promised to cook new things every single day if only Shizun would let him—

Shen Qingqiu found he couldn't quite bring himself to mind.

"Very well," he agreed. "Binghe can cook for this master from now on."

The smile that broke across Binghe's face was like sunrise after a storm.

He paused at the threshold, looking back. Shizun's eyes were already closed again, his breathing evening out into sleep. In the soft lamplight, he looked ethereal—like something too precious for this world, like a painting come to life.

Like the sculptures in the hidden alcove.

The thought struck Binghe like a physical blow, sudden and unexpected.

The mysterious man. The one Shizun treasured enough to fill a secret room with art dedicated to his memory.

Where was he?

If Shizun had been poisoned—if Shizun had been on death's door, fighting for his life—where was the man Shizun loved? Why hadn't he come? Why hadn't he demanded to be at Shizun's bedside, tending to him, protecting him the way Binghe had been doing for three days straight?

The more Binghe thought about it, the stranger it seemed. Yue Qingyuan had been by every few hours, his face grave with concern. Mu Qingfang was practically living in the bamboo house, checking on Shizun constantly. Liu Qingge had even stopped by twice, standing awkwardly in the doorway with some kind of rare herb he'd hunted down.

But the one person who *should* have been there—the one whose love Shizun clearly valued above all others—was absent.

Why?

The question followed Binghe as he stumbled to his own quarters, as he mechanically ate the food that Ning Yingying had left for him, as he collapsed onto his bed with the intention of

resting for just an hour before returning to Shizun's side.

Why hadn't the mysterious man come?

Was he... was he dead? Had something happened to him, and that was why Shizun kept his memory locked away in that secret alcove, too painful to display openly?

The thought should have brought relief. If the man was dead, then he wasn't competition. Wasn't an obstacle between Binghe and any slim chance he might have of earning Shizun's regard.

Instead, it just made Binghe feel hollow.

Because if the man was dead, that meant Shizun was mourning. That meant every piece of art, every carefully crafted sculpture, was a monument to grief that would never fully heal. That meant Binghe would always be competing with a ghost.

And ghosts, Binghe thought bitterly as sleep finally dragged him under, were impossible to fight.

The dream began, as dreams often did, without logic or warning.

One moment Luo Binghe was drifting in comfortable darkness, exhausted enough that even his racing thoughts had finally quieted. The next, he was standing in a space that wasn't quite real—mist swirling around his feet, shadows shifting at the edge of his vision.

And Shizun was there.

"Shizun!" Binghe rushed forward, relief flooding through him. "How are you here? Are you —"

"This is the dream realm," Shen Qingqiu explained, looking around with the expression of a man cataloguing his surroundings for future reference. "A space between waking and sleep. It seems we've both wandered into it."

Binghe had so many questions—*how did this work, why were they here, was this dangerous* —but before he could voice any of them, the mist shifted.

And the memories began.

They came in fragments at first: flashes of a childhood Binghe had tried very hard to forget. A small boy on the streets, curled against the cold. A child being kicked away from a market stall, his only crime being too hungry and too visible. Jeering faces. Thrown stones. The thousand small cruelties that had taught Luo Binghe exactly how much the world valued his existence.

No—

Binghe's heart rate spiked. He could feel panic clawing at his throat, his carefully constructed walls crumbling as the dream realm pulled his worst moments to the surface.

"Binghe." Shizun's voice, calm and steady. "These are just illusions. They cannot hurt you."

But then the scene shifted, and Binghe saw *her*.

His mother, lying on a thin pallet, her face gaunt with illness. A younger Binghe knelt beside her, tiny hands clutching at her robes, begging her to hold on, to stay, to not leave him alone —

The sound that escaped Binghe's throat was barely human.

He lashed out blindly, power he didn't know he had surging through him, and his fist connected with something solid.

The illusions shattered.

And Shizun staggered back, hand pressed to his cheek where Binghe had struck him.

Horror flooded Binghe's veins, drowning out everything else. "Shizun—I didn't—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright." Shizun's voice was steady, though his eyes held something complicated. "It's alright, Binghe. It was an accident."

"This disciple will never let Shizun be hurt again," Binghe vowed, the words torn from somewhere deep inside him. "Never. Not by anyone. Not by *this disciple's* hand, not by demons, not by *anything*."

Shizun's expression softened into something that made Binghe's chest ache. "Silly boy. This master will be the one to always protect *you*."

Before Binghe could respond, the mist shifted again—and a new presence made itself known.

"Well, well," said a voice like smoke and shadows. "How touching."

An old man materialized from the mist, features shifting and blurring at the edges in a way that marked him as something distinctly *other*. His eyes fixed on Shen Qingqiu with something like calculation.

"Who—" Binghe started, moving instinctively between Shizun and the intruder.

"A dream demon," Shizun said, and there was an edge to his voice that Binghe had never heard before. "What do you want with my disciple?"

"So protective." The demon's smile was sharp. "But I think the boy and I need to have a private conversation."

And before Binghe could react, the mist surged—and Shizun was gone.

“What did you do to him?!” Binghe snarled, spinning to face the demon. “Bring him back!”

“Relax, child. I simply sent him to another dream. He’ll wake normally, unharmed. I wanted to speak with you alone.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve been watching you.” Meng Mo circled him slowly, predator assessing prey. “Watching your dreams. Watching your *memories.* Fascinating things, memories. They tell the truth that waking minds try to hide.”

Binghe’s blood ran cold. “You’ve been in my head.”

“I’ve been *recuperating* in your head. There’s a difference.” Meng Mo waved a dismissive hand. “But that’s not what I wanted to discuss. I wanted to offer you a deal.”

Something in Binghe’s chest went tight. “I don’t make deals with demons.”

“No?” Meng Mo’s eyes gleamed. “Not even to become strong enough to protect that teacher of yours? The one who just took poison for you? The one who will suffer for the rest of his life because you weren’t *powerful enough?*”

The words hit like physical blows.

“I could teach you,” Meng Mo continued, softer now. “Teach you to access the power that’s been locked away inside you. Teach you to become something *more.*”

“Locked away?” Binghe’s voice came out strangled. “What are you talking about?”

“You haven’t figured it out yet? I thought I was being obvious.” Meng Mo leaned closer. “You’re not fully human, boy. There’s demon blood in your veins—strong demon blood, stronger than anything I’ve seen in centuries. Someone sealed it away when you were younger.”

The dream realm seemed to spin around Binghe.

Demon. He was a *demon*.

“No,” he whispered. “That’s impossible.”

If the cultivation world found out—if Shizun found out—

He would be expelled. Hunted. Killed.

“I could help you control it,” Meng Mo offered. “Help you hide it. Or help you *use* it.” His eyes glittered. “Think about it. You could become powerful enough that no one could ever hurt the people you love again. Powerful enough to protect your precious Shizun from anything.”

Binghe thought of Shizun lying pale in bed, suffering from a poison that would never leave his system.

Thought of how useless he'd been to stop it.

Thought of what he'd give—what he'd *become*—to make sure it never happened again.

"What do you want in return?"

Meng Mo's smile was triumphant. "Nothing much. I'm stuck in your head anyway, feeding on your dreams while I recover. Consider this… mutual benefit. I teach you, you keep us both alive, and when I'm strong enough to leave, I go." He tilted his head. "One condition, though."

"What?"

"You don't call me Shizun." Meng Mo's expression flickered with something like distaste. "One teacher in your heart seems to be quite enough."

Despite everything, despite the horror and the fear and the world tilting beneath his feet, Binghe almost laughed.

"Deal."

Binghe woke gasping.

He was on his feet before he was fully conscious, stumbling through the darkness of the woodshed where he'd been sleeping, one thought burning through his mind: Shizun. He had to check on Shizun—

He burst through the bamboo house door without knocking, propriety forgotten, and found Shizun sitting up in bed, very much awake, expression complicated.

"Shizun!" Binghe stumbled forward. "Are you—is Shizun—"

"I'm fine." Shizun's voice was calm, steady. "Binghe, are you alright?"

The question was so unexpected that Binghe couldn't answer for a moment. He'd expected anger, perhaps, at being ejected from the dream so abruptly. Expected questions about the demon. Expected—

But Shizun was checking him for injuries. Reaching out to brush the hair from Binghe's face, fingers gentle against his forehead.

"I'm—this disciple is fine." Binghe's voice cracked. "Shizun, about that demon—"

"We can discuss it later," Shen Qingqiu said, withdrawing his hand. "You were pulled from a dream realm too suddenly. Sit."

Binghe obeyed, though his heart was still racing. "That demon said… strange things."

"Dream Demons specialize in that." Shen Qingqiu's tone was even. "They look for fear and give it a voice. Don't assume truth just because it sounds convincing."

"Yes, Shizun." Binghe lowered his eyes.

Shen Qingqiu reached for his fan, tapping it once against his palm. "During the invasion, the demons withdrew once their objective was met. That alone tells us they're not mindless."

Binghe's fingers curled into his sleeves.

"If they were," Shen Qingqiu continued, as if thinking aloud, "negotiation would have been pointless. Strategy requires restraint."

"Shizun…" Binghe hesitated, then asked softly, "Are demons always evil?"

Shen Qingqiu paused.

"Evil isn't unique to demons," he said at last, “Humans can be good or bad, so naturally, demons too can be good or evil."

The room fell quiet.

Binghe's chest felt tight, as if something fragile had been set loose inside it.

"I understand," he whispered.

"Good." Shen Qingqiu closed his fan. "Don't dwell on what you heard. If you experience anything else unusual, report it immediately."

"Yes, Shizun."

Shen Qingqiu lay back, clearly dismissing the matter. "Go rest. Actually—" He paused, seemed to consider something. "Pack your things tomorrow and move to the room outside this master's bamboo house. This master would rather have you closer, after... recent events."

Binghe's breath caught and he moved without thinking, without breathing, and somehow ended up with his arms wrapped around Shizun in a hug so desperate it probably hurt.

Shizun made a small *oof* sound, and Binghe felt a hand pat his back—awkward, uncertain, but *there.*

“Thank you,” Binghe whispered into Shizun’s shoulder. “Thank you, Shizun.”

He bowed deeply, not trusting his voice. When he finally managed to speak, it came out rough. "Thank you, Shizun."

Binghe turned away, his thoughts in turmoil.

Shizun hadn't condemned demons.

Shizun hadn't looked at him with suspicion.

And that was enough to make hope bloom—dangerous, bright, and entirely his own.

Three nights later, Luo Binghe met Meng Mo in the dream realm and told him he would accept his offer.

The training began immediately.

If Binghe had expected something mystical—ancient demon secrets passed down in hushed whispers, forbidden techniques revealed with appropriate gravitas—he was sorely disappointed. Meng Mo taught through repetition, exhaustion, and a casual disregard for his student's comfort.

"Feel for the energy," Meng Mo commanded night after night. "Not the orthodox qi you've been cultivating—the *other* one. The dark current beneath it."

"I don't—"

"Try harder."

It took weeks before Binghe finally felt it: a pulse of something *other* in his meridians. Something that responded to his emotions rather than his discipline. Something that felt like fire and darkness and the desperate, clawing need to *survive.*

"There," Meng Mo said, and for once there was something like approval in his voice. "That's it. That's your true power."

Binghe had never felt so terrified in his life.

The demonic qi was *hungry*. It fed on emotion—fear, rage, despair—and Binghe had plenty of all three locked away inside him. The training dragged them to the surface whether he wanted it or not.

The nightmares came.

Every night now, whether he was training with Meng Mo or not, Binghe found himself trapped in memories he'd spent years trying to forget. His mother's death. The cruel children who'd beaten him for the crime of existing. The hunger, the cold, the endless grinding *loneliness* of being unwanted.

And alongside them, newer fears: Shizun pale and poisoned, Shizun discovering what Binghe really was, Shizun looking at him with disgust and turning away—

Binghe woke from these nightmares gasping, his demonic qi surging beneath his skin like a caged beast. It took all his control to force it back down, to smooth his expression into something normal before facing the day.

He couldn't let Shizun see. Couldn't let anyone suspect.

During the day, he was the perfect disciple: diligent, devoted, endlessly attentive to Shizun's needs. He cooked breakfast and dinner, fetched texts and medicines, hovered by Shizun's side like a particularly anxious shadow.

At night, he trained in secret and battled nightmares that left him shaking.

The dichotomy was exhausting. But Binghe had survived worse. Would survive this too.

For Shizun's sake, he would endure anything.

It happened during one of the nightmares.

Binghe was trapped in the familiar hellscape of his worst memories when the dream suddenly *shifted*—and he found himself somewhere new. Somewhere that felt like his own memory, but distorted, wrong.

A hidden alcove. Paintings and sculptures lining the walls. And a figure rendered in clay and canvas, commanding and powerful, with features that burned themselves into Binghe's brain.

He'd been back to the alcove since his first discovery, of course. Had studied those artworks with the obsessive attention he brought to everything concerning Shizun. Had noted every detail, every brushstroke, every curve of sculpted clay.

But in the dream, the details were sharper. Clearer.

And the mark on the figure's forehead—that strange symbol Binghe had never been able to see properly—

It blazed with crimson light.

"Interesting," said Meng Mo's voice from somewhere behind him. "Very, very interesting."

Binghe spun. The dream demon had materialized beside him, studying the artwork with an expression of shrewd calculation.

"These aren't my memories," Binghe said. "How—"

"Dreams are funny things." Meng Mo moved closer to one of the paintings, head tilted. "They blur together. Especially when someone's been thinking about something obsessively enough to imprint it on their subconscious."

Binghe felt his face heat. "I haven't been—"

"Don't bother lying to me, boy. I live in your head, remember?" Meng Mo's eyes narrowed as he studied the glowing mark. "But that's not what I find interesting. What I find interesting is *this*."

He pointed at the mark.

“Do you know what this is?”

Binghe’s throat felt dry. “I’ve been trying to figure that out.”

“It’s a demon mark.” Meng Mo’s voice had gone flat, serious in a way Binghe had never heard from him. “And not just any demon mark. That’s a *heavenly demon* mark. The imperial line. The ruling family.”

The words hit Binghe like a bucket of ice water.

“There’s only been one heavenly demon of significance in recent history,” Meng Mo continued, his eyes still fixed on the artwork. “Tianlang-Jun. The demon emperor. Defeated and sealed by the cultivation sects.”

The implications cascaded through Binghe’s brain like a rockslide.

Shizun—his Shizun—had loved a demon. Not just any demon, but *the* demon. The emperor of the entire demon realm. Had loved him enough to create years of artwork preserving his image. Had loved him enough to keep that love secret, hidden away, because the cultivation world would never accept it.

Shizun loved a demon.

And then, immediately on the heels of that realization: *Wait…That means I have a chance!*

If Shizun could love a demon—if Shizun *had* loved a demon—then maybe…

But the hope curdled almost immediately into something more complicated.

Shizun knew, he thought wildly. *That question about demons being evil—Did Shizun suspect what I am?*

Is that why he’s been kind to me?

The thought was both exhilarating and devastating. Because if Shizun was only kind because he saw something of his demon lover in Binghe—

Then Binghe was just a substitute. A pale imitation of the real thing.

And even if that wasn’t the case—even if Shizun genuinely cared for Binghe himself—

Shizun had loved *the demon emperor.*

The most powerful demon in existence. A being of legendary strength and terrible majesty, whose mark alone was enough to make other demons kneel.

How could Binghe possibly compete with *that?*

He was just some half-demon bastard who couldn’t even access his demonic powers properly. Just a disciple who’d needed to be saved from poison-spikes because he wasn’t fast

enough, strong enough, *good* enough—

"You're spiraling," Meng Mo observed dryly. "I can feel it from here. Stop that."

Binghe's hands were shaking. He clenched them into fists. "The demon emperor is sealed," he said, and his voice came out steadier than he felt. "Imprisoned."

"Under a mountain, yes." Meng Mo's expression was calculating. "Which means your Shizun has been… *pining*… for quite some time."

Pining.

That was why the mysterious lover in the paintings never visited, never wrote, never made himself known. Why Tianlang-Jun hadn't appeared when Shizun was poisoned.

He was *imprisoned.*

Which meant Shizun was alone. Had been alone, mourning a love he could never reach for years.

Binghe's heart ached with sympathy even as jealousy coiled in his gut.

"So," Meng Mo said, and there was something almost like curiosity in his voice now, "what are you going to do about it?"

Binghe stared at the painting of Tianlang-Jun—at those crimson eyes, that knowing smile, that mark of imperial power—and felt something settle in his chest.

He couldn't compete with the demon emperor as he was now. Couldn't hope to measure up to that kind of legend, that kind of power.

But Tianlang-Jun was sealed away. Unable to reach Shizun. Unable to protect him, comfort him, *be there* for him.

And Binghe *was* here.

He couldn't be the demon emperor. Couldn't replace a love that had inspired years of secret devotion.

But he could become something else. Something *more.*

He could become the one who stayed. The one who protected Shizun when no one else could. The one who earned his own place in Shizun's heart—not as a substitute for Tianlang-Jun, but as Luo Binghe.

"I'm going to train harder," Binghe said, and his voice didn't waver. "I'm going to master every technique you can teach me. I'm going to become so powerful that nothing—not demons, not cultivators, not even sealed demon emperors—can threaten the people I care about."

Meng Mo's smile was sharp. "That's the spirit."

The dream dissolved, and Binghe woke to morning light streaming through the window of his new room—the room just outside Shizun's bamboo house.

He lay there for a moment, processing everything.

Shizun had loved a demon. Might still love him. Might be waiting, even now, for a reunion that could never come.

And Binghe was a demon too. Half-demon, at least. The very thing that should have made him untouchable, unlovable, *monstrous*—

Might actually be his greatest asset.

If Shizun could love the demon emperor, he could love Binghe. If Shizun saw past race to the person beneath, saw good in creatures the world called evil—

Then maybe. Just maybe. Binghe had a chance.

He rose from bed, dressed quickly, and went to prepare breakfast for his Shizun.

Outside, the sun was rising over Qing Jing Peak.

Inside Luo Binghe's heart, something had shifted. Something had settled into place.

He would train. He would grow. He would become something worthy of standing at Shizun's side.

And one day—one day—

He would make Shizun see *him.*

Chapter 4: What the Mark Meant

Two years passed like water through silk—swift, smooth, and deceptively quiet.

Luo Binghe had grown.

Not just in height, though that was certainly noticeable. At seventeen, he stood nearly as tall as Shen Qingqiu himself, his shoulders broadening into something that promised future devastation. His face had lost the last of its childish softness, jaw sharpening into angles that made the female disciples whisper behind their fans and the male disciples grind their teeth in envy.

But the real growth, Shen Qingqiu knew, was invisible.

Beneath that earnest smile and devoted demeanor, Luo Binghe had become something *more*. His cultivation had advanced at a pace that drew concerned looks from Mu Qingfang and approving nods from Liu Qingge. His sword work was precise, powerful, increasingly difficult to find fault with. And his cooking—

Well. His cooking had always been exceptional.

【PROTAGONIST DEVELOPMENT: ON TRACK】 the System informed him helpfully. *【POWER LEVEL: APPROACHING CRITICAL THRESHOLD. RECOMMEND PREPARATION FOR IMMORTAL ALLIANCE CONFERENCE】*

Shen Qingqiu dismissed the notification with the ease of long practice. He'd learned to tune out the System's more alarmist warnings over the past two years, focusing instead on the day-to-day reality of being Luo Binghe's teacher.

It was... nice, actually. Nicer than he'd expected.

Binghe had moved into the small room attached to the bamboo house after the Without-a-Cure incident, and somehow that arrangement had never changed. He cooked breakfast and dinner without fail, kept Shen Qingqiu's study meticulously organized, and hovered with a devotion that should have been stifling but instead felt oddly... comfortable.

Like having a very large, very attentive dog. One that could also prepare restaurant-quality meals and defeat mid-level demon beasts single-handedly.

Shen Qingqiu had stopped questioning it. Some gifts, he'd decided, were best accepted without examination.

The mission had been a simple one—escort a merchant caravan through territory known for bandit activity, provide visible deterrent, return with experience and contribution points. Standard fare for senior disciples, and Binghe had been away for nearly three weeks.

Three weeks during which Shen Qingqiu had definitely not noticed the absence.

Had not, for instance, found himself glancing toward the kitchen at mealtimes only to remember that no one was there to cook. Had not caught himself saving interesting passages from texts to discuss, only to realize his usual audience was absent. Had absolutely not spent an entire evening reorganizing his desk because the silence felt too loud.

He was a grown man. A Peak Lord. He did not *miss* his disciple like some—

"Shizun!"

Shen Qingqiu's head snapped up at the familiar voice, and he was moving before his brain caught up with his body—stepping out onto the porch of the bamboo house, one hand reaching for the railing as if to steady himself against the sudden rush of—

Relief, his traitorous mind supplied. *That's relief.*

Luo Binghe was striding up the path, travel-worn but smiling, his eyes fixed on Shen Qingqiu with an intensity that made something flutter uncomfortably in the region of his chest. The late afternoon sun caught in his hair, gilding the dark strands with amber, and for a moment he looked less like a disciple returning from a mission and more like—

A painting, Shen Qingqiu thought involuntarily. *He looks like one of my paintings come to life.*

The thought was deeply inappropriate and he banished it immediately.

"You're back early," Shen Qingqiu said, aiming for composed and landing somewhere in the vicinity of *slightly breathless*. He'd moved too quickly getting up. That was all. The poison sometimes made him dizzy. "The mission was scheduled for another week."

Binghe's smile widened, something almost playful dancing in his eyes. "This disciple completed the objective ahead of schedule." He stopped at the base of the porch steps, looking up at Shen Qingqiu with an expression that was—

Fond. It was fond. And something else, something that made Shen Qingqiu's throat feel tight.

"The truth is," Binghe continued, his voice dropping into something softer, "this disciple missed Shizun too much to delay returning."

Shen Qingqiu felt heat creep up the back of his neck. "Ridiculous," he managed. "Missing this master is no excuse for rushing a mission."

"This disciple didn't rush." Binghe mounted the steps, bringing them to eye level. This close, Shen Qingqiu could see the road dust on his robes, the slight windburn on his cheeks. "This disciple was simply... motivated."

There was a pause.

Binghe tilted his head slightly, that almost-playful expression returning. "Did Shizun miss this disciple?"

"Don't be absurd."

"Shizun's desk is reorganized." Binghe's eyes flicked past him, toward the interior of the bamboo house. "Shizun only reorganizes when he's restless."

This brat.

"Shizun was not restless," Shen Qingqiu said with dignity. "Shizun was... optimizing his workflow."

"Of course." Binghe's smile was innocent. Suspiciously innocent. "Is this disciple at least pleasing to look at after his journey? Or has the road made him too disheveled for Shizun's refined tastes?"

The question startled a laugh out of Shen Qingqiu—genuine, surprised, warming something in his chest that had been cold for three weeks.

"Fishing for compliments doesn't become you," he said, but there was no heat in it. "Go wash up. You smell like horse."

"Yes, Shizun." Binghe bowed, but his eyes were bright with triumph, as if he'd won something precious.

Later, after Binghe had bathed and changed and produced a dinner that had no right being as delicious as it was after three weeks on the road, they sat together in Shen Qingqiu's study. The evening had settled into comfortable quiet, broken only by the rustle of paper as Shen Qingqiu reviewed mission reports and the soft sounds of Binghe cleaning his sword.

It was domestic. Peaceful.

Temporary, some part of Shen Qingqiu whispered. *The Immortal Alliance Conference is coming. This peace won't last.*

He pushed the thought away.

"Binghe."

The sword-cleaning stopped. "Yes, Shizun?"

Shen Qingqiu set down his brush, considering his words carefully. This was a conversation he'd been planning for some time—had been waiting for the right moment to broach. The Conference was approaching, and with it, events that would reshape Luo Binghe's entire existence.

He needed to know if the boy was ready.

"This master has a question for you."

Binghe set aside his sword, giving Shen Qingqiu his full attention. "This disciple is listening."

"Do you want to be the strongest?"

The question hung in the air between them. Binghe's expression flickered—surprise, then something more complicated.

"Shizun?"

"It's a simple question." Shen Qingqiu met his eyes steadily. "Strength comes at a cost. The path to true power requires sacrifice—pain, isolation, choices that may haunt you. The strongest cultivators have often walked through fire to reach their positions." He paused. "Do you want that? Even knowing what it might cost?"

Binghe was quiet for a long moment.

When he spoke, his voice was steady. "Yes."

"Even if it meant enduring extreme torment? Even if the path forward seemed impossible?"

"Yes." No hesitation this time. Binghe's eyes burned with something fierce and unwavering. "This disciple wants to be strong. Strong enough to protect—" He stopped, swallowed. "Strong enough to protect what matters most."

What matters most.

He found himself nodding slowly.

"Good," he said. "Remember that conviction. You'll need it."

Binghe's brow furrowed slightly. "Shizun speaks as if... as if something is coming."

Something is always coming, Shen Qingqiu thought. *That's how stories work.*

"The cultivation world is never truly peaceful," he said instead. "Conflict, competition, demons—threats appear when we least expect them. A cultivator must be prepared." He picked up his brush again, then paused. "The Immortal Alliance Conference is in three months. You'll be representing Qing Jing Peak."

Binghe's eyes widened. "Shizun—this disciple is honored, but surely there are senior disciples who—"

"None of them can match your current level." It was simply true. "You've grown beyond what this master anticipated. The Conference will be..." He searched for the right word. "An opportunity. To test yourself against the best of your generation."

And to fall into the Endless Abyss, his mind added grimly. T*o be betrayed by everything you trusted.*

But that was the plot. And the plot, as much as Shen Qingqiu had tried to soften its edges, was still grinding forward.

"This disciple will not disappoint Shizun," Binghe said, and the conviction in his voice was almost painful to hear.

You won't, Shen Qingqiu thought. *You'll exceed every expectation.*

"See that you don't," he said aloud, and returned to his paperwork.

The evening settled back into quiet. But something had shifted between them—some acknowledgment of what was to come, even if neither of them could name it directly.

Outside, the first stars were appearing over Qing Jing Peak.

Inside, a teacher and his disciple sat in comfortable silence, each lost in thoughts they couldn't share.

The Conference was coming.

And with it, everything would change.

The fall seemed endless.

Binghe tumbled through darkness so absolute it felt like being unmade. The wound in his chest screamed with each impact, each brush against invisible walls that tore at his robes and skin.

Shizun.

The word echoed through his mind like a prayer turned curse.

Shizun pushed me.

Shizun stabbed me and pushed me into the Abyss.

Shizun looked at me like I was a monster and threw me away.

He hit the ground—a slope of loose rock that sent him tumbling and sliding until he crashed into a boulder hard enough to crack ribs. The pain was almost welcome. It gave him something to focus on besides the hollow, aching chasm where his heart used to be.

For a long moment, he simply lay there. Bleeding. Broken. Trying to remember how to breathe.

"Well," said a dry voice in his head, "that could have gone better."

Meng Mo. The dream demon who'd taught him demonic cultivation in secret for two years. Who'd helped him understand the strange power that lurked beneath his skin.

Who'd never told him he was a Heavenly Demon.

"Did you know?" Binghe's voice came out raw. "Did you know what I was?"

A pause. Then: "I suspected. The power in you... it was too refined to be common demonic heritage. But I wasn't certain until I saw the mark manifest."

Binghe laughed. The sound echoed through the darkness, brittle and broken.

"Everyone knew," he said. "Everyone except me."

He pushed himself up slowly, ignoring the agony in his chest. His demonic energy was already working to heal the wound—another reminder of what he was. What he'd apparently always been.

The Abyss stretched around him in all directions. Absolute darkness, broken only by the faint phosphorescent glow of fungi on distant rocks. The air was thick with demonic miasma, so concentrated it felt like breathing through water.

Everything here wanted to kill him. He could feel the predatory attention of things lurking in the shadows, drawn by his blood, by his weakness.

Let them come. Let them all come. At least demons were honest about wanting him dead.

"What exactly is a Heavenly Demon?" he asked Meng Mo. "And don't give me the political explanation. I want to know why it matters. Why Shizun reacted like that."

More silence. Then: "Heavenly Demons are the royal bloodline of the demon realm. The most powerful demons in existence. There are very, very few of them—the mark only manifests in those with direct bloodline connection to the demon royalty."

"So I'm what, demon nobility?" Binghe's lips twisted. "And that's supposed to be so terrible that even Shizun—" His voice cracked.

"The last known Heavenly Demon," Meng Mo said carefully, "was Tianlang-Jun. The Demon Emperor. He was defeated and sealed away by the cultivation sects seventeen years ago."

Seventeen years.

The number settled into Binghe's mind like a stone dropped into still water.

Seventeen years ago. Right around when he would have been born. When he would have been *abandoned*.

Because Binghe had always known the truth of his origins. The washerwoman—his mother in every way that mattered—had never lied to him about it. She'd found him as an infant, half-frozen near a river, wrapped in nothing but thin cloth. No note. No name. No explanation.

Just a baby someone had thrown away.

She'd taken him in anyway. Raised him. Loved him. But she'd never pretended to be his birth mother, and Binghe had grown up knowing that somewhere out there, someone had looked at him and decided he wasn't worth keeping.

Now he knew why.

"Heavenly Demon marks are hereditary," Meng Mo continued. "You'd only have one if one of your parents was a Heavenly Demon. And since Tianlang-Jun was the only known Heavenly Demon of that generation..."

"He's my father," Binghe finished. The words tasted like poison. "The Demon Emperor is my father. And he—what? Got some woman pregnant and then abandoned the child?"

"Tianlang-Jun was involved with a human cultivator," Meng Mo said. "A woman named Su Xiyan, from Huan Hua Palace. The timing would fit."

So that was it. His birth mother had been a cultivator. His father had been the Demon Emperor. And between the two of them, they'd decided Binghe wasn't worth keeping—had left him to freeze by a riverbank like unwanted refuse.

The abandonment he'd carried his whole life suddenly had a shape. A name. A face he'd seen rendered in paint and clay in his teacher's secret alcove.

But what did any of that have to do with Shizun?

Binghe thought about the alcove. About the paintings and sculptures he'd discovered months ago in his shameful exploration of Shizun's private quarters. About the powerful figure with the commanding presence and the mark on his forehead.

A Heavenly Demon mark. Just like the one burning on Binghe's skin right now.

He'd spent months trying to identify that figure. Had tormented himself wondering who could command such devoted attention from his teacher. Now the answer was obvious—so obvious he felt stupid for not seeing it sooner.

The man in those paintings was Tianlang-Jun. The Demon Emperor. *His father.*

Shizun had spent years—*years*—creating art of the Demon Emperor. Had hidden it away in a secret alcove like something precious. Had rendered every angle, every expression, every detail with the kind of attention that spoke of deep familiarity. Of intimacy.

"Meng Mo," Binghe said quietly. "If Shizun knew the Demon Emperor somehow... if he had some connection to Tianlang-Jun..."

"Then seeing you manifest a Heavenly Demon mark would be quite the shock," Meng Mo finished. "Especially if that connection was... intimate."

The word hit Binghe like a physical blow.

Intimate.

Shizun's secret alcove, filled with artwork depicting a powerful demon. Years of dedication. The careful attention to every angle, every expression. The way some of the paintings captured something soft and private in those crimson eyes.

That wasn't the work of a casual observer. That was the work of someone who had *loved*.

"He loved my father," Binghe said aloud, the words tasting like ashes. "Shizun loved Tianlang-Jun."

"That's quite a leap in logic—"

"And my father abandoned him." The realization crashed over Binghe like a wave. "Just like he abandoned me. The Demon Emperor had something with Shizun—something real, something that mattered—and then he threw it away. Left him for a woman he got pregnant. Then left her, too, probably. And left their child to freeze by a river."

He laughed, and the sound echoed bitterly through the darkness.

Tianlang-Jun had thrown away *everyone*. Had looked at Shen Qingqiu—beautiful, elegant, devoted Shen Qingqiu—and decided he wasn't enough. Had looked at his own newborn son and decided he wasn't worth keeping.

And now Binghe understood why Shizun couldn't stand the sight of him when his heavenly demon mark manifested.

He could still see it. Every detail burned into his memory with perfect, agonizing clarity.

The way Shizun's face had drained of color when he looked at Binghe's forehead. The way his hands had trembled. The way his voice had gone strange and hollow, like something inside him had cracked.

"You said demons weren't evil," Binghe had said—begged, really, clinging to those words like a drowning man clinging to driftwood. *"You said demons too can be good or evil—"*

"But you're not a simple demon."

Even now, alone in the dark, Binghe flinched at the memory. At the way Shizun's voice had sounded. At the look in those jade-green eyes—not anger, not disgust, but something worse. Something that looked almost like grief.

"That mark on your forehead. Do you know what it is?"

Binghe remembered reaching up. Remembered the heat still pulsing against his fingertips, the unfamiliar shape of something that had changed everything.

"A... a demon mark?"

"A Heavenly *demon mark."*

And Binghe had watched—helpless, desperate, not understanding—as every door slammed shut behind Shizun's eyes.

At the time, he hadn't understood the specificity of that horror. Hadn't known why *Heavenly* demon mattered so much more than just *demon*. Hadn't been able to connect the dots between his mark and his unknown parentage and the secret alcove full of artwork.

But now, sitting in the darkness of the Abyss with nothing but time to think, it all made terrible sense.

Shizun had looked at that mark and seen *him*. Seen Tianlang-Jun. Seen the man he'd loved, the man who'd abandoned him, the man whose face Shizun had rendered in paint and clay a hundred times over.

No wonder he'd recoiled. No wonder he couldn't explain. What was he supposed to say? *I loved your father and he left me for someone else and now you're standing here with his mark on your forehead like a living reminder of everything I lost?*

"I'm the reminder," Binghe said quietly. "When Shizun looks at me, he sees proof of what my father did to him."

No wonder he'd pushed Binghe away. The mark on Binghe's forehead wasn't just proof of demonic heritage—it was proof of betrayal. Of rejection. Of a love that had meant nothing to the man Shizun had given it to.

The thought that followed was worse. Quieter. The kind of thought that lodged itself between his ribs and refused to leave.

"Was any of it real?" Binghe whispered into the darkness. "Any of Shizun's kindness. The way he looked at me sometimes, like I mattered. The gentle corrections, the extra lessons, the times he let me sit close while he worked..." His voice cracked. "Was any of that for *me*? Or was I just..."

Was I just a convenient replacement for what he'd lost?

The question hurt more than the wound in his chest. More than the fall. More than any of it.

Because Binghe could survive being thrown away. He'd survived it before—survived being left to freeze as an infant, survived the streets, survived years of abuse and neglect. He knew how to exist when no one wanted him.

But the thought that Shizun's kindness had never been *his*—that every soft word, every patient explanation, every moment Binghe had treasured had actually been meant for someone else—

That was a different kind of death.

"I need to know," he said, voice raw. "I need to understand if there was ever a version of me that Shizun actually saw. Or if he was always looking through me, seeing someone else's

face."

Meng Mo was silent for a long moment. Then: "Does it matter? The kindness happened. The teachings were real. Whether his motivations were—"

"It matters." Binghe's hands clenched into fists. "It matters because I don't want to be a ghost. I don't want to be anyone's shadow or stand-in. I don't want to spend my whole life being measured against a man I've never met."

His voice dropped, raw and aching.

"I want to be seen as myself. As just Binghe. Not as anyone's son, not as anyone's replacement. Just... me."

The words echoed through the darkness of the Abyss, swallowed by stone and silence.

"Is that so much to ask?" he continued, softer now. "To be loved for who I am, not for who I remind someone of? To have someone look at me and see *me*, not the echo of someone they lost?"

He thought about all the hours he'd spent trying to be worthy. Learning to cook Shizun's favorite dishes. Studying until his eyes blurred. Training until his muscles screamed. Doing everything, *everything*, to earn even a fraction of genuine attention.

And maybe none of it had mattered. Maybe Shizun had looked at him the whole time and seen only a ghost wearing a disciple's robes.

"You can't change what he feels," Meng Mo said quietly. "You can only change what you become."

Binghe was silent for a long moment. Then something in him hardened.

"Then I'll become something he can't ignore. Something so powerful, so undeniable, that he'll have no choice but to see me standing in front of him instead of looking through me for someone else."

Hatred bloomed in his chest, hot and consuming. Not for Shizun—never for Shizun, who had been hurt just as badly as Binghe himself. But for *him*. For the man in those paintings. For the father who'd abandoned everyone who'd ever cared about him.

All this time, Binghe had been trying to win Shizun's approval. His affection. His *love*. He'd thought if he became strong enough, devoted enough, worthy enough, Shizun might someday see him as more than just a disciple.

But he'd been competing with his own father the entire time. Competing with a ghost. And worse—he carried that ghost's face, that ghost's bloodline, that ghost's damning mark.

"Why?" The question tore out of him, ragged and raw. "Why would he leave someone like Shizun? Why would he throw everything away?"

Because Binghe had eyes. He knew what Shizun looked like, had memorized every elegant line of that beautiful face. Had watched his teacher move with the kind of grace that made poems seem inadequate. Had spent countless hours trying to be worthy of even standing in his shadow.

What kind of monster looked at *that* and walked away?

The same kind of monster who left an infant to die in the snow.

"I hate him," Binghe said, and the words felt like a vow. "I hate him more than I've ever hated anything."

Not because Tianlang-Jun was a demon. Not because he'd been sealed away or defeated or whatever the cultivation world had done to him.

Because he'd had everything—Shizun's love, a child, a future—and he'd thrown it all away like garbage. Because he'd broken Shizun's heart and left Binghe to grow up worthless and unwanted. Because even now, even dead or sealed or gone, his shadow poisoned everything Binghe tried to build.

I'll find him, Binghe thought. *I'll find out what really happened. I'll understand why he threw everyone away—why he left Shizun, why he abandoned me, why he couldn't be bothered to care about anyone but himself.*

And then I'll make him pay for it.

"What are you going to do?" Meng Mo asked.

Binghe looked up at the faint glow of fungus on the rocks, at the oppressive darkness surrounding him.

"I'm going to survive," he said. "I'm going to become stronger than anyone expects. Strong enough that when I get out of here, Shizun will have no choice but to see me."

"Not as Tianlang-Jun's son. Not as a reminder of the man who hurt him. As *me*. As Luo Binghe."

"Even if it takes years. Even if I have to become exactly the kind of demon everyone fears."

"I'll make him see me. And I'll prove that I'm nothing like my father."

The determination settled into his bones like steel. Around him, the darkness of the Endless Abyss pressed close, filled with dangers he couldn't yet imagine.

But Luo Binghe had survived worse than this. Had survived being abandoned as an infant, his mother's death, poverty, abuse from his martial siblings, and now rejection by the one person he'd thought would never give up on him.

He would survive this too.

And when he climbed back out, he would have two goals: make Shen Qingqiu see him for who he truly was—and destroy any legacy Tianlang-Jun had left behind.

His father had ruined everything. Had broken Shizun's heart, had abandoned Binghe before he could even open his eyes, had cast a shadow so long that Binghe couldn't escape it even now.

But shadows could be burned away.

And Luo Binghe was going to burn very, very brightly.

Chapter 5: Even Here

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first month was the worst.

Or he assumed it was a month. Time didn't work properly down here—no sun, no moon, no way to mark the passage of hours except by how exhausted he became before his body demanded sleep. The darkness was absolute in places, broken only by the phosphorescent glow of toxic fungi or the red gleam of predatory eyes tracking his movement.

Everything wanted to kill him. This was not an exaggeration or the dramatic whining of a pampered disciple unused to hardship. Binghe had grown up on the streets, had known hunger and cold and violence from the time he could walk. He understood survival.

But the Abyss was something else entirely.

The demon wolves came first—massive creatures with claws that dripped paralytic venom and jaws that could crush bone like paper. Binghe killed his first one on the second day, more through desperate luck than skill, and discovered that their meat was edible if you cooked it long enough to burn away the toxins.

Then came the serpents. The crawling things with too many legs. The creatures that had no names in any human language, twisted by centuries of concentrated demonic energy into shapes that hurt to look at directly.

Binghe fought them all. Sometimes he won. Sometimes he ran. More than once, he crawled into a crevice too small for whatever was chasing him and huddled there, bleeding and shaking, waiting for dawn that never came.

His demonic power, no longer suppressed by the seal, was both blessing and curse.

On one hand—he was stronger now. Faster. His senses had sharpened until he could hear a creature's heartbeat from twenty meters away, could smell blood on the wind, could see in the dark well enough to navigate without light. His spiritual roots, already exceptional, had transformed into something else entirely. Something that responded to desire and intent rather than meditation and proper form.

On the other hand—he had no idea what he was doing.

The lessons were brutal. Meng Mo was not a patient teacher, and Binghe was not a patient student, and between them, they managed to turn most training sessions into arguments that ended with Binghe storming off to kill something.

But slowly—painfully—Binghe learned.

He learned to pull demonic energy through his meridians without tearing them apart. Learned to enhance his body beyond human limits, to heal wounds that should have been fatal, to command lesser demons through sheer force of will.

The nightmares were constant.

Not the ones Meng Mo fed on—those were simple fears, straightforward terrors of death and darkness and things with too many teeth. No, the dreams that truly haunted Binghe were the ones about *before*.

He dreamed of Shizun's face when he'd seen the demon mark. That look of devastation, of horror, of something that might have been grief. He dreamed of jade-green eyes going cold, of a voice saying *but a heavenly demon is different* like the words were a death sentence.

He dreamed of the alcove. Of paintings and sculptures that now made terrible, devastating sense.

In his dreams, the figure in those artworks would turn to look at him, smile cruelly, reach out a hand toward Shizun—and Shizun would *take it*, would lean into the touch, would look at that man with all the warmth and love that Binghe had so desperately wanted for himself.

I'm right here, please see ME—

But Shizun never turned. Never looked. Just kept gazing at the ghost of Tianlang-Jun while Binghe faded into nothing.

He woke from those dreams gasping, clawing at his own chest like he could tear out the ache lodged there. Sometimes he woke up already crying, tears tracking through the grime on his face before he could stop them.

Pathetic, he told himself each time. *Crying over a man who threw you away. Crying over someone who never loved you—just loved the shadow of someone else.*

The self-recrimination never helped. The tears came anyway.

Six months in, Binghe stopped counting days.

"You're brooding again," Meng Mo observed.

"I'm strategizing."

"You're staring into the middle distance with that expression you get when you're thinking about your teacher. That's brooding."

Binghe didn't bother denying it. What was the point?

"I need more power," he said instead. "I need to become strong enough that when I get out of here—"

"You'll what? Storm back to Cang Qiong Mountain and demand answers?" Meng Mo's voice was dry. "That will go well, I'm sure. The cultivation world will definitely welcome back a heavenly demon with open arms."

"I don't care about the cultivation world." Binghe's hands curled into fists. "I care about *him*. About understanding what happened. About proving that I'm not—"

He stopped. Swallowed.

About proving I'm not just my father's shadow.

"There are ways to gain power more quickly," Meng Mo said after a long pause. "Artifacts. Weapons. Things lost in the Abyss over the centuries that could accelerate your growth."

"Then tell me where they are."

"I don't *know* where they are, boy. The Abyss is vast. But I know they exist. If you're willing to hunt for them..."

Binghe was willing. Binghe was willing to do almost anything, at this point, if it meant getting strong enough to claw his way out of this pit and find the answers that haunted his dreams.

He learned what his blood could do.

It had happened by accident, the first time. A demon beast had torn open his arm, and Binghe —desperate, cornered, out of options—had flung the blood at its face more out of spite than strategy.

The creature had *screamed*. Had clawed at its own eyes as Binghe's blood burned through them like acid. Had collapsed, twitching, as the heavenly demon essence in Binghe's veins did something horrible to its internal organs.

Binghe had stared at his bleeding arm, then at the dying creature, and thought: *Oh. That's useful.*

After that, he'd experimented. Carefully at first, then with increasing boldness as he learned the scope of what he could do. His blood was a weapon—could burn, could poison, could solidify and stab, could even *control* lesser demons if he applied it correctly. A few drops on a creature's tongue, and its body would be a simple puppet to Binghe’s blood burning through its system. A smear on a wound, and he could track that creature anywhere.

It was disgusting. It was violating. It made him feel like a monster.

He did it anyway, because monsters survived down here, and Binghe refused to die.

The Endless Abyss, he learned, was not the same as the demon realm proper.

The demon realm had society—brutal and hierarchical, but *society*. Lords and territories and politics. Demons who could speak, who could reason, who built things and wanted things beyond their next meal.

The Abyss had none of that. This was the dumping ground, the forgotten pit where the demon realm threw its refuse. The creatures here were mostly beasts—grotesque, mindless things that operated on instinct and hunger. No culture. No civilization. Just an endless evolutionary arms race of predators becoming more efficient at killing.

The few sentient demons Binghe encountered were usually exiles. Criminals. Beings too dangerous or too insane for even demon society to tolerate.

They were not, as a rule, interested in conversation.

The plants were the worst.

Not the carnivorous ones—those were straightforward. Don't touch, don't eat, don't sleep near them. Simple rules for simple dangers.

No, the worst were the ones that looked harmless. Soft flowers that released clouds of pollen when disturbed. Vines that brushed against skin and left oils that absorbed through contact. Fungi that filled caves with invisible spores.

Aphrodisiacs. Because apparently the Abyss had decided that trying to eat Binghe wasn't enough—it also wanted to humiliate him.

The first time it happened, Binghe had stumbled through a field of something that looked like pale orchids. Within an hour, his skin was burning. Not with pain—with *want*. Every nerve ending lit up with desperate, clawing arousal that made his hands shake and his vision blur.

He'd hidden in a cave, curled around himself, trying to meditate through it. Trying to cultivate the sensation away. Trying to think about *anything* except the way his body was screaming for touch.

It hadn't worked.

What had worked, eventually, was time. Hours of shaking and sweating and biting through his own lip to keep from making noise, until finally—*finally*—the effects faded enough that he could think again.

After that, Binghe learned to identify the plants. Learned which ones to avoid, which caves to check for spores before entering, which paths were safe to walk without protection.

But sometimes he couldn't avoid them. Sometimes he stumbled into a patch before he recognized it, or the wind shifted wrong, or he was too injured to take the long way around.

And sometimes, when he was compromised—skin burning, mind hazy, body aching with manufactured need—things would find him.

The Abyss was mostly beasts, but not entirely. And some of those sentient demons, those exiles and criminals, had apparently decided that a young heavenly demon drugged into desperate arousal was an opportunity too good to pass up.

The first one had worn a humanoid shape. Had approached Binghe with a smile that was probably supposed to be seductive, hands already reaching—

Binghe had torn out his throat before he finished his sentence.

The second one had been more cautious. Had waited until Binghe was deeper in the haze, until his movements were clumsy and his reactions slow. Had actually managed to get hands on him before Binghe's blood—dripping from a wound on his palm—had burned through the creature's skin and given Binghe enough of an opening to kill it.

After that, the attempts became less frequent. Word spread, apparently, even in the Abyss: the heavenly demon boy was not easy prey, no matter how compromised he seemed.

But they never stopped entirely.

And every single time—every creature that looked at Binghe with hunger that wasn't about food, every demon that thought his altered state made him *available*—Binghe killed them. Killed them brutally, thoroughly, with a viciousness that went beyond self-defense into something darker.

How dare you, he thought, standing over their corpses. *How dare you touch what isn't yours.*

Because Binghe's body wasn't his own to give away. It belonged to someone else. Had belonged to Shizun from the moment Binghe had understood what wanting someone meant.

And anyone who tried to take what was Shizun's—even if Shizun didn't want it, even if Shizun would never claim it—deserved exactly what they got.

A year passed.

Binghe stopped being a boy and became something else. Something harder. Sharper. The soft edges that had once made him bring tea to his teacher, had once made him leave anonymous gifts and cook elaborate meals just to see Shizun smile—those edges calcified into armor.

He learned every demonic technique Meng Mo could teach him, then developed new ones through brutal trial and error.

He became a name whispered in the darkness. A threat. A power.

And still, every night, he dreamed of jade-green eyes looking through him at someone else.

I will make you see me, Binghe promised the ghost of his teacher. *I will become so powerful you cannot look away. Cannot pretend I'm anyone but myself.*

Even if it kills me.

Even if it destroys everything.

I will make you SEE.

Two years into his time in the Abyss—or possibly longer, time had stopped mattering—Binghe finally killed the nest of creatures that had been inhabiting this stretch of territory.

They'd been massive things, scaled and multi-limbed, with too many eyes and a tendency to hunt in coordinated packs that suggested an intelligence Binghe found personally offensive. He'd been tracking them for weeks, picking off stragglers, learning their patterns, waiting for the right moment to strike at their lair.

The right moment had arrived approximately an hour ago, and now Binghe was covered in viscera that was definitely not his own, standing in the center of their nest, breathing hard and surveying the carnage.

"Efficient," Meng Mo commented. "Brutal. I approve."

Binghe didn't respond. He was staring at the back of the nest, where the creatures had apparently made their den around something embedded in stone.

Bones littered the area—not just the fresh kills from his battle, but older remains. Much older. Some were demon bones, massive and warped in ways that suggested powerful cultivators. Others were smaller, more human-shaped, though twisted by the Abyss's corruption. All of them seemed to have died reaching toward the same point.

Toward the sword.

It was embedded in a slab of dark rock, blade buried to the hilt, surrounded by the skeletal remains of those who had tried and failed to claim it. The creatures had built their nest around it like a shrine—or a warning. The sword itself radiated power so intense that approaching it felt like walking into a hurricane made of hunger and malice.

Binghe took a step closer. Then another.

Something about the sword was... familiar.

The shape of it. The curve of the hilt. The way the blade seemed to drink in the dim light rather than reflect it.

No.

Binghe's heart stuttered. He moved closer, stepping over bones and corpses, his eyes fixed on the weapon with growing horror.

He knew that sword.

He'd seen it a hundred times. Rendered in careful brushstrokes and loving detail. Gripped in elegant hands, held at rest or raised in battle, always present in those hidden paintings like a

faithful companion.

Shizun's secret alcove of artwork.

The subject of all those secret pieces—that tall figure with the aristocratic features and the arrogant smile—he'd always been depicted with a sword. Binghe hadn’t given it much thought back then. He'd been so focused on the figure's face, on trying to identify him, on cataloging every expression and angle that Shizun had deemed worthy of preservation.

He'd never thought to wonder about the sword.

But now, standing in front of it, there was no mistaking the match. The distinctive curve. The unusual hilt design. The way the blade seemed almost alive with contained violence.

This was the sword from the paintings.

This was *his father's sword.*

"Oh," Binghe said, and his voice came out strange. Hollow. "Of course it is."

"What?" Meng Mo asked.

Binghe didn't answer. He was too busy laughing—or trying to. The sound that came out was closer to a wheeze, the kind of noise a person made when they'd been hit in the chest and couldn't quite catch their breath.

Of course, this was Tianlang-Jun's sword. Of course, Binghe would stumble across another piece of his absent father's legacy, discarded in the dark like everything else the man had gotten tired of. Of course, the most powerful weapon he'd encountered in over two years of fighting for survival would turn out to be yet another reminder that Luo Binghe was nothing but a footnote to someone else's story.

"You threw this away, too," Binghe said to the ghost of a father who couldn't hear him. "Just like Shizun. Just like me."

The sword pulsed with hungry energy, and Binghe felt it like a hook in his chest—*want, take, consume, MINE—*

He took a step back, breathing hard.

"That sword," Meng Mo said slowly, his voice carrying a new weight. "I recognize it. Xin Mo."

"You know it?"

"I know *of* it. Legends, mostly. Stories that demons tell to frighten each other." Meng Mo's presence in Binghe's mind felt unusually serious. "They say it can cut through reality itself. Tear holes between realms. Grant its wielder power beyond imagining."

"That sounds useful," Binghe said flatly.

"They also say it devours everyone who tries to claim it. Drives them mad with bloodlust. Consumes their sanity until there's nothing left but a vessel for the sword's hunger." A pause. "Those bones around you? I suspect they're not all prey from the beasts who nested here."

Binghe looked at the skeletal remains more carefully. Meng Mo was right—some of them were old. Very old. And their positions... they'd died reaching for the sword. Trying to claim it. Failing.

"How many?" Binghe asked.

"Impossible to say. Dozens, at least. Maybe hundreds, over the centuries. The sword is... particular about its wielders. Most don't survive the attempt."

Binghe stared at the blade. His father's blade. The weapon that had been present in painting after painting, sculpture after sculpture—always there, always faithful, until suddenly it wasn't.

Just like everything else he touched.

"Are you certain this sword belonged to Tianlang-Jun?" Meng Mo asked carefully. "It looks like it's been here for a very long time. Centuries, perhaps. The legends of Xin Mo predate even—"

"Look at all these bones," Binghe cut him off. "That's not age—that's a body count."

"But—"

"I *know* what I saw in those paintings." Binghe's voice was flat, final. "I spent months staring at them. Memorizing every detail. That sword was in almost every piece. I'm not wrong about this."

Meng Mo fell silent, wisely choosing not to argue further.

And Binghe—Binghe didn't care if the old demon believed him or not. He knew what he knew. He'd traced the lines of that sword with his eyes a hundred times, trying to understand the man who wielded it, trying to find some clue about why Shizun had loved him so much.

Now he understood. The sword was just another thing Tianlang-Jun had abandoned when it became inconvenient.

He cared so much it felt like his chest might crack open from the weight of it. But admitting that felt too much like weakness, and Binghe had learned the hard way that weakness got you killed in the Abyss.

The sword pulsed again. *Want. Take. Consume.*

"It's hungry," Binghe observed.

"It's always hungry. That's the nature of Xin Mo—it feeds on its wielder. Their energy, their emotions, their sanity. The more you use it, the more it takes."

"And if I'm stronger than it?"

Meng Mo was quiet for a long moment. "No one has ever been stronger than Xin Mo. Not for long."

Binghe smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. "He couldn't handle it. That's why he left it here."

"What?"

"My father." The word tasted bitter. "He couldn't control this sword. Couldn't handle its hunger. So he abandoned it—just like he abandoned everything else that became difficult." Binghe's hands curled into fists. "Just like he abandoned Shizun. Just like he abandoned *me*."

The parallel was almost elegant in its cruelty. Tianlang-Jun had left Xin Mo embedded in stone in a demon wasteland, and Tianlang-Jun had left his son to starve on the streets of a human city. Both discarded. Both forgotten. Both waiting in the dark for someone who was never coming back.

Father of the year, Binghe thought viciously. *Really committed to seeing things through.*

"I'll be better," Binghe said, and his voice was steady. Certain. "I *am* better. I don't throw things away just because they're difficult."

He took a step toward the sword. The sword's energy pressed against him like a physical weight, hungry and eager and utterly, ravenously interested.

"I've spent years in this hellscape. I've killed everything that tried to kill me. I've survived on nothing but spite and stubbornness and the absolute refusal to die before I get my answers."

Another step. He was close enough to touch it now.

"Tianlang-Jun abandoned this sword because he was weak. Because he couldn't handle something that demanded more than he was willing to give." Binghe's voice was steady, certain. "I'm not him. I won't throw things away just because they're hard."

The sword's hunger surged, and for a moment Binghe felt it—the full weight of Xin Mo's attention, ancient and terrible and absolutely delighted to have found such an interesting new prospect.

MINE, the sword seemed to say.

"No," Binghe replied, and reached for the hilt. "*You're mine.*"

The moment his fingers closed around it, pain exploded through every nerve in his body.

The sword's consciousness—because it definitely had one, dark and hungry and utterly, gleefully insane—slammed into his mind like a battering ram. It was nothing like the gentle mental touch of Meng Mo. This was invasion, violation, a force trying to crack him open and pour itself inside.

MINE MINE MINE CONSUME DEVOUR BREAK FEAST—

Binghe gritted his teeth and *pulled*.

The sword came free from the stone with a sound like shattering glass. Red energy erupted around him, so intense that it cracked the ground beneath his feet. The bones of failed claimants scattered, blown back by the force of power released.

The sword's consciousness writhed in his grip, trying to overwhelm him. Trying to take control. Trying to add him to the collection of corpses surrounding its resting place.

You'll break, it seemed to croon. *They all break. Even he broke, in the end. What makes you think—*

"*Shut up,*" Binghe snarled, and poured his own power into the blade.

His heavenly demon blood—the heritage he'd cursed, the bloodline that had gotten him thrown into this abyss—rose to meet the sword's hunger. And for the first time, Binghe was truly grateful for it. Grateful for the power he'd never asked for, the strength he'd never wanted, the demonic energy that made him something other than human.

Because it was that energy that let him push back. That let him meet the sword's ravenous consciousness and *refuse to yield*.

My father couldn't control you, Binghe thought at the sword, his mental voice savage. *He threw you away. Left you here. But I'm not him. I don't abandon things just because they're hard.*

The sword's resistance flickered. Just for a moment—a brief hesitation in its assault.

I'm going to claim you, Binghe continued. *I'm going to master you. And when I get out of here, I'm going to use your power to prove that I'm worth more than anything he ever threw away.*

Something shifted.

The sword's hunger didn't disappear—it would never disappear, Binghe understood that now. Xin Mo was a weapon built on consumption, and it would always want more. But its assault... softened. Changed. Became less about destruction and more about... testing.

Interesting, the sword seemed to say. *You might actually last.*

"I'll do more than last," Binghe replied, and felt the sword's acknowledgment like a dark laugh in the back of his mind.

When the red light finally faded, Binghe stood holding Xin Mo, breathing hard but victorious.

"Well," Meng Mo said after a long silence. "That was either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid."

"Both," Binghe replied. He looked down at the sword in his hands. His father's sword. The weapon that Tianlang-Jun had carried in painting after painting, sculpture after sculpture—always present, always faithful, until suddenly it wasn't.

Just like everything else he touched.

And then the realization hit him.

Shizun.

Shizun, who had painted that sword a hundred times. Who had rendered it in loving detail alongside the figure he clearly still mourned. Who would recognize Xin Mo the moment he saw it, because he'd spent hours—years—immortalizing its image.

If Binghe returned to the surface wielding this sword, Shizun would *know*. Would look at Binghe and see—

Him. He'll see Tianlang-Jun. He'll see the man he loved holding the sword that man carried. He'll see a ghost.

The thought was like swallowing broken glass.

"I can't show him this," Binghe said quietly.

"What?"

"When I get out. When I go back." Binghe's grip tightened on the hilt. "I can't let Shizun see this sword. He'll recognize it. He'll look at me and see—"

He couldn't finish the sentence. Didn't have to.

Will I have nothing untainted by that man?

His blood. His face. His demon mark. And now his weapon—the most powerful tool he'd ever held, the thing that might finally give him enough strength to *matter*, and he'd have to figure out a way hide it. Disguise it. Keep it secret.

Because the alternative was Shizun looking at him and seeing only Tianlang-Jun's son wielding Tianlang-Jun's sword. Seeing only the ghost of his lost love instead of Binghe himself.

Another secret, Binghe thought, his mouth twisting. *Another piece of myself I have to bury to be worthy of love.*

"You'll need to disguise it," Meng Mo said, his voice unusually gentle. "Change its appearance. Make it look like something else."

"Can I do that?"

"With enough control over demonic energy, yes. It will take practice. Months, probably. Maybe longer." A pause. "But you have time."

Time. Yes. Binghe had nothing but time.

He looked around at the carnage of the nest, at the bones of those who had failed to claim Xin Mo, at the endless darkness of the Abyss stretching in every direction.

"I'll learn," Binghe said. "I'll master this sword, and I'll learn to hide what it really is. And when I finally get out of here—"

He thought of Shizun's face. Of jade-green eyes and gentle hands. Of the alcove full of paintings dedicated to someone who wasn't him.

"—when I finally face Shizun again, I'm going to be so much more than my father's shadow. I'm going to be strong enough, worthy enough, that he has to see *me*. Just me."

The sword pulsed in his grip, warm with something that might have been approval.

Or hunger. With Xin Mo, it was hard to tell the difference.

Binghe didn't particularly care. He had a weapon now. A path to power. A way forward.

And if that path required him to master the sword his father had abandoned—to succeed where Tianlang-Jun had failed—well. That was just one more way to prove he wasn't the man who'd thrown him away.

He started walking, leaving the nest behind. The Abyss stretched endlessly before him, dark and hostile and deadly.

Binghe didn't look back.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so first of all, thank you SO much for all the comments??? I'm genuinely floored by the response to this story. It's been living rent-free in my brain for about a year now and I finally managed to exorcise it onto the page, so knowing other people are enjoying watching Binghe spiral into increasingly unhinged conclusions is deeply validating.

Some of you have pointed out that Binghe is essentially writing fanfiction in his head and. Well. You're not wrong. The man sees a painting and constructs an entire tragic backstory complete with secret demon lovers and generational rivalry. Sir, this is a Wendy's. Sir, that's literally YOU.

LBH is basically like: Who IS that man? Will Shizun ever love ME enough to paint me for years?

Oh no, I'm a demon and Shizun will never love me...
Wait. That man was a DEMON?! Does this mean I have a chance???
THAT MAN WAS MY FATHER????
Now this sword is his TOO?!?!
SHIZUN SEEEE MEEEEEEE

Meanwhile, Tianlang-Jun, still under that mountain, just vibing, unaware he's being thrown under the bus for stealing Shizun's heart when he's literally never met the man. I've seen a lot of you speculating about how he's going to react to all this... 👀

Anyway! This isn't beta'd because I have approximately zero (0) impulse control and the fic is like 99% done so I'm just posting chapters as fast as I can edit them. If you spot typos, no you didn't. ♡

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 6: The Man Shizun Painted

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Binghe stood at the edge of a cliff, Xin Mo at his side, and surveyed the domain he'd carved out through blood and determination.

Three years.

Three years of darkness, of screaming, of learning to become something harder than the Abyss that tried to break him. Behind him lay the corpses of every beast that had thought him easy prey. Ahead of him lay... everything else.

"Ready to return to the world that threw you away?" Meng Mo asked, his voice echoing through the dream-space between Binghe's thoughts.

"No," Binghe admitted. His fingers traced the hilt of Xin Mo, feeling the sword hum with anticipation—or perhaps hunger. It was difficult to tell the difference sometimes. "But I'm going anyway."

He'd forged himself into a weapon. Sharp enough to cut through any obstacle. Powerful enough to face whatever the cultivation world threw at him.

Powerful enough, maybe, to finally get some answers.

"Huan Hua Palace would have records," Binghe said. "About my father. About what happened. All of it."

"They're not going to hand that information over to a demon," Meng Mo said. "Your mark alone would get you executed on sight."

Binghe barely heard him.

The problem was that he had *pieces*. Fragments that didn't fit together no matter how many times he turned them over during the long Abyss nights. He knew Tianlang-Jun had been a demon emperor—powerful, feared. He knew his father had come to the human realm, fathered a child he'd never acknowledged, gotten himself sealed away.

And he knew about the alcove.

The memory surfaced before he could stop it: that bamboo house bathed in candlelight. Shizun's face soft with an expression Binghe had never seen directed at him. Tender. Longing. *Loving.* All of it aimed at sculpture after sculpture, painting after painting, rendered with the kind of devotion that spoke of years. Of obsession.

Shizun had loved Tianlang-Jun. Maybe still loved him. But Binghe didn't know *how*, didn't know the story—when it started, how long it lasted, what they had been to each other.

What he did know was how it had ended.

Him.

Binghe was the proof, wasn't he? Living evidence that Tianlang-Jun had chosen someone else. Had taken another woman to his bed, fathered a child, and left Shizun behind.

He remembered the moment Shizun had seen his demon mark. That split second before horror overtook his features. Binghe had spent three years telling himself that reaction was simple prejudice—a righteous cultivator's revulsion at demonic blood.

But that wasn't it. That wasn't it at all.

That look hadn't been disgust at what Binghe *was*. It had been devastation at what Binghe *meant*.

Shizun had recognized the mark. Had known immediately whose bloodline it came from. And in that moment, he'd been confronted with undeniable proof that the man he'd loved had left him for someone else. Had fathered a child with another woman while Shizun was still building shrines. Still longing. Still looking at Binghe's face and seeing his father's ghost staring back.

Binghe's jaw tightened until his teeth ached.

Why?

What had his father and Shizun been to each other? What could possibly have made Tianlang-Jun walk away from someone like Shen Qingqiu—from that gentle voice and those elegant hands and that rare softness Binghe had only ever glimpsed when Shizun thought no one was watching?

"I need the records," Binghe said. "The real histories, not rumors. Everything the cultivation world knows about Tianlang-Jun. And where he's sealed."

"And then what?" Meng Mo asked. "You'll have a conversation with your father?"

"Yes." Binghe could picture it already—standing before the man whose face he'd inherited, whose shadow had loomed over Shizun's heart for years before Binghe had ever existed. Finally demanding answers. *What did you do? Why did you leave him? What made you choose my mother instead?*

"After that, I take Huan Hua. Their resources, their legitimacy. Then the demon realm—everything my father once held and more."

Meng Mo laughed. "Both realms. All to surpass a man who's been sealed away for nearly two decades?"

Binghe didn't answer.

The truth was simpler than that. More pathetic. Underneath all the plans—the infiltration, the conquest, the accumulation of power—there was only one destination.

Qing Jing Peak.

He would return. Not as a discarded disciple. Not as Tianlang-Jun's son, living proof of his father's betrayal. But as someone who understood everything. Who had taken his father's legacy and made it into something greater.

Someone who could stand before Shizun and say: *I am not him. I won't leave. I won't choose someone else.*

Choose me instead.

"Let's go," Binghe said, stepping toward the rift. "Time to find out what my father did to lose everything. And make sure I don't make the same mistakes."

He stepped through, leaving the Endless Abyss behind.

Huan Hua Palace was beautiful in the way poisonous flowers were beautiful—all gleaming pavilions and carefully manicured gardens, designed to distract from the rot underneath.

Binghe had arrived with a carefully crafted story: a Cang Qiong Mountain disciple who had fallen into the Abyss during the conference and miraculously survived. Traumatized, uncertain, not yet ready to return to his sect and face the questions, the memories.

Could Huan Hua Palace perhaps grant him sanctuary while he recovered?

The disciples had practically tripped over themselves to welcome him.

"You survived the Endless Abyss?" one girl breathed, her eyes wide with admiration. "For three years?"

"Two and a half," Binghe corrected with practiced humility. Time moved strangely in the Abyss, but he'd settled on a number that seemed believable. "Though it felt like much longer."

"You must be so strong," another disciple said, moving closer than was strictly proper. "So brave."

Binghe smiled—the soft, slightly sad smile he'd perfected for this role. The smile that said *I've been through so much* without actually saying anything specific. "I only did what I had to do to survive."

It was sickening how easily they believed him. How quickly they accepted his story without question. These pampered sect disciples who had never known real hardship, never had to fight for every scrap of survival—they saw his expensive robes (salvaged from demon lords he'd killed), his refined manner (learned from watching Shizun), his devastating looks (courtesy of his heavenly demon bloodline), and assumed he was one of them.

They had no idea they were welcoming a demon into their midst.

"You must meet the Palace Master," an older disciple insisted. "He'll want to hear about your survival. Such a miraculous tale!"

And so Binghe found himself standing before the Old Palace Master of Huan Hua—an elderly man with a kindly smile and gentle eyes that would have fooled anyone who hadn't grown up on the streets.

But Binghe had spent his childhood learning to read people. Learning which merchants would cheat him, which adults would hurt him, which smiles hid predatory intent.

And the Old Palace Master's smile made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"Young Master Luo," the old man said warmly, gesturing for Binghe to sit. "What an incredible story. To survive the Endless Abyss—you must be blessed by the heavens themselves."

"This one was merely fortunate," Binghe replied, settling into the careful deference expected of a junior cultivator. "And determined to return to the world above."

"Determined indeed." The Palace Master's eyes—kindly, grandfatherly eyes—studied Binghe with an intensity that didn't match his gentle tone. "Tell me, young man, what kept you going down there? What gave you the will to survive?"

My Shizun, Binghe thought. *The need to prove myself. The determination to be seen.*

"This one simply... couldn't give up," he said aloud. "Couldn't let the Abyss be the end of my story."

"Admirable. Truly admirable." The Palace Master leaned back in his chair. "And now that you've returned—what are your plans? Will you return to Cang Qiong Mountain?"

There it was. The first probe. The first attempt to determine Binghe's usefulness, his potential value.

Binghe had seen this before. Street merchants eyeing a mark. Slave traders evaluating merchandise. The calculation behind kind words, the assessment behind gentle smiles.

This old man looked at Binghe and saw an opportunity. A powerful young cultivator, traumatized and vulnerable, potentially available for recruitment.

"This one... isn't certain," Binghe said carefully. "The memories of what happened at the conference are still difficult. And Cang Qiong Mountain..." He let his voice trail off, allowing them to fill in whatever tragic backstory they wanted to imagine.

"Of course, of course." The Palace Master's smile widened slightly. "You must take all the time you need to recover. Huan Hua Palace is honored to provide sanctuary to such a promising young cultivator."

Promising. There was the word. The assessment.

"You're too kind, Palace Master."

"Not at all. In fact—" The old man's eyes gleamed with something that definitely wasn't kindness. "I would be delighted if you would consider staying with us longer term. Huan Hua Palace is always seeking talented disciples. A young man who survived the Endless Abyss would be a tremendous asset."

"This one is grateful for the offer," Binghe replied. "But this one couldn't possibly make such an important decision so quickly. This one would need time to consider—"

"Of course, of course! No pressure at all." The Palace Master made a magnanimous gesture. "Please, stay as our guest for as long as you need. Get to know our sect. Perhaps you'll find that Huan Hua Palace suits you better than your previous home."

The words were kind. The smile was warm. And underneath it all, Binghe could sense the calculation. The same energy he'd felt from merchants who would sell moldy rice to starving children if it meant a profit.

"This one is honored by Palace Master's generosity," Binghe said, bowing.

"Wonderful! I'll have my daughter show you around the grounds. She's close to your age—I'm sure you'll get along splendidly."

Something about the way he said it made Binghe's skin crawl.

The Little Palace Mistress was exactly what Binghe had expected: beautiful, spoiled, and utterly convinced of her own importance.

"So you're the one who survived the Abyss," she said, looking him up and down with obvious appreciation. Her gaze lingered on his shoulders. His chest. Traveled lower in a way that made his skin crawl. "You're much prettier than I expected."

Binghe maintained his pleasant smile. It was a mask he'd learned to wear in the Abyss—pleasant, harmless, unremarkable—and it fit just as well here. "This one thanks the Palace Mistress for her kind words."

"Call me Hua Lian." She moved closer, her hand brushing his arm with calculated casualness. Her fingers pressed in slightly, testing. Measuring. Like she was evaluating the quality of goods at market. "We don't need to be so formal. Father says you might be joining our sect permanently."

"This one hasn't decided—"

"Oh, you should definitely stay." Her smile was sharp. Predatory in a different way than her father's, but no less calculating. "Huan Hua Palace is so much better than Cang Qiong Mountain. More prestigious. Wealthier. And—" She leaned in conspiratorially, close enough

that he could smell her perfume, cloying and too-sweet. "The disciples here are much more... *appreciative* of talent."

The way she looked at him made something in Binghe's stomach turn.

He knew that look. Had seen it before—in the Abyss, when certain demons had caught him in the aftermath of stumbling through patches of aphrodisiac flora. Those creatures with their too-human faces and hungry eyes, watching him shake and sweat through the effects, waiting to see if he'd weaken enough to be easy prey. They'd looked at him like he was something to be *used*. Like his body was a resource to be consumed, his consent an inconvenience to be worked around.

The Little Palace Mistress had the same eyes. The same evaluation. *How much is he worth? How easily can I acquire him? What will he cost me, and what will I gain?*

She wasn't even bothering to hide it.

"Palace Mistress is too kind," he said, taking a subtle step back.

She didn't seem to notice—or didn't care. Her hand found his arm again, proprietary. "Father thinks we'd make a good match, you know. A powerful cultivator like you, joining our family officially." Her thumb stroked over his sleeve, a gesture that was probably meant to be enticing. It made him want to scrub his skin raw. "It would be quite the alliance."

Ah. There it was. The real reason for the Old Palace Master's excessive hospitality.

They didn't just want to recruit a talented disciple. They wanted to bind him to their sect through marriage. Wanted to *own* him, control him, parade him around like a prized stallion put to stud.

The irony wasn't lost on him. He'd spent three years in the Abyss being hunted by monsters, and now he was being hunted by humans in silk robes who thought their wealth and status entitled them to whatever they wanted.

At least the demons had been honest about their intentions.

Binghe thought about Shizun. About jade-green eyes and gentle hands and the soft way he'd say "Binghe is doing well" when he was pleased. About the way Shizun had *never* once looked at him like he was something to be acquired. Binghe couldn't imagine those elegant hands touching him with this kind of... ownership. This assumption of access.

"This one is... flattered," Binghe managed. The word tasted like ash. "But this one is not ready to consider such matters. The Abyss was... difficult. This one needs time to recover before thinking about the future."

"Of course!" Hua Lian's smile didn't falter. If anything, it sharpened—a merchant recognizing a hard sell but not a lost cause. "No rush at all. But you'll see—once you spend more time here, once you get to know our sect properly, you'll realize that Huan Hua Palace is where you belong."

Never, Binghe thought with quiet intensity. *I will never belong to people like you.*

But aloud he just smiled and nodded and played the role of the traumatized, uncertain disciple who might be persuaded to stay.

Because he needed access to their records. Needed information about Tianlang-Jun.

And if that meant enduring the Palace Master's false kindness and his daughter's grasping hands for a few more weeks, then that's what he would do.

He'd survived three years in the Endless Abyss. He'd survived demons who wanted to eat him, fuck him, or both.

He could survive this.

It took three months of careful manipulation to gain access to Huan Hua Palace's restricted archives.

Three months of playing the uncertain disciple. Of allowing the Little Palace Mistress to monopolize his time, to show him around the sect, to make increasingly obvious attempts at seduction that Binghe deflected with practiced obliviousness.

Three months of enduring the Old Palace Master's calculating smiles and pointed comments about *promising young cultivators* and *the importance of building strong family alliances.*

Three months of training with Huan Hua disciples who looked at him with admiration and envy, who competed for his attention like he was a prize to be won.

But he endured. Because at the end of those three months, he finally got what he came for.

"Young Master Luo," the Old Palace Master said one evening, his smile particularly sharp. "You've shown such interest in cultivation history. Would you like to see our archives? We have records dating back centuries—including accounts of the great demon conflicts."

Finally.

Three months of playing the dutiful potential son-in-law, and here was the opening he'd been waiting for.

"This one would be honored," Binghe replied with perfect calm. "History has always fascinated this one."

The archives were extensive. Impressive. Full of carefully maintained records of battles, cultivation breakthroughs, political alliances.

And in a locked section at the back, accessible only with the Palace Master's personal permission—records of the campaign against Tianlang-Jun.

Binghe read them with his heart in his throat.

The Demon Emperor Tianlang-Jun was a threat to the entire cultivation world. His power was immense, his ambition boundless. He sought to merge the demon and human realms, to rule over both.

But he had a weakness. A human woman—Su Xiyan, one of our most talented disciples. She caught his attention during a border skirmish. He became... obsessed.

We used that weakness. Convinced Su Xiyan to get close to him, to gain his trust. She played her role admirably, even allowing the demon to believe she cared for him.

When the time came, she led him into our trap. We sealed him beneath Bailu Mountain, where he remains to this day.

Su Xiyan disappeared after the battle. It's believed she fled in shame for having consorted with a demon, even for the righteous cause. Her fate remains unknown.

Binghe stared at the words, his hands shaking.

His mother. His mother had been *bait*. A trap. Had pretended to care for Tianlang-Jun to lure him to his defeat.

Which meant whatever had led to Binghe's conception—it had all been a lie. A scheme. His mother had used his father, betrayed him, helped seal him away.

And then she'd fled.

Fell for a trap, Binghe thought bitterly. *Trusted someone you shouldn't have. And paid for it.*

But what did this mean for Shizun?

If Tianlang-Jun had been obsessed with Su Xiyan—if that obsession had been genuine on his part, even if it was manipulation on hers—then *when* had he known Shizun?

The timeline assembled itself in Binghe's mind like puzzle pieces clicking into place. Seventeen years ago, Tianlang-Jun was defeated. But the alcove artwork, the obvious devotion Shizun had shown—those could have been from before. From when Tianlang-Jun was still free, still powerful, still the Demon Emperor.

Before he'd abandoned Shizun to pursue Su Xiyan.

Before he'd thrown everything away for a woman who was only pretending.

You really did leave him, Binghe thought, something cold and satisfied settling in his chest alongside the bitterness. *Left Shizun behind to chase after my mother. And it was all a trap anyway. You lost everything—your freedom, your throne, the one person who actually cared about you—for a lie.*

His father had been powerful. Had been the Demon Emperor. Had apparently had someone who loved him enough to create years' worth of secret artwork—

And he'd thrown it all away.

I would never.

The thought was fierce. Absolute.

If Shizun looked at me the way he looked at those paintings, I would never doubt it. Never stray. Never make the mistake of chasing something false when I had something real.

I'm better than you. Smarter. Stronger.

I'll prove it.

He carefully noted the location mentioned in the records: Bailu Mountain. Where Tianlang-Jun remained sealed. Where his father had been imprisoned ever since.

Binghe had questions. So many questions.

And his father—sealed and powerless as he was—would answer them.

Making excuses to come and go from Huan Hua Palace as he pleased—so he'd have time to subjugate the demon realm—was easier than infiltrating it had been.

"I need time," Binghe told the Old Palace Master, maintaining his uncertain, traumatized persona. "To think about my future. To decide what I want."

"Of course, young man." The old man's smile was understanding, but his eyes were calculating. "But remember—Huan Hua Palace's doors are always open to you. You'll have permanent guest quarters so you may return as often as you wish. And my daughter has grown quite fond of you."

Your daughter wants a trophy husband, Binghe thought. *And you want a powerful cultivator you can control.*

"This one is grateful," he said aloud, bowing. "And will remember Palace Master's kindness."

He left before they could push harder. Before the pressure to commit, to stay, to marry into their sect became impossible to deflect.

And as soon as he was clear of their territory, he dropped the disguise. Let his demonic energy flow freely for the first time in months. Let the exhaustion of maintaining that constant deception finally show on his face.

"Mortifying," Meng Mo commented. "All that bowing and scraping."

"Necessary," Binghe replied. "I have what I needed. Now it's only a matter of time before I'm in a position to take over completely."

He pulled out Xin Mo and let the glamours fall away, its black blade gleaming with barely contained power. The sword thrummed in his hand, hungry.

"Bailu Mountain," Binghe said quietly. "That's where he's sealed."

"You're really going to confront him?" Meng Mo asked. "What do you expect to accomplish?"

"Answers." Binghe raised Xin Mo, channeling his demonic energy through the blade. "I need to understand what happened. Why he abandoned Shizun for my mother. If he regrets it. If it was worth it."

His voice cracked slightly. He took a breath, steadying himself.

"I need to know if any of it mattered. If Shizun's feelings mattered to him at all. If there's any chance that when Shizun looks at me, he might someday see past the shadow of what was lost."

"And if your father can't give you those answers?"

Binghe's grip tightened on Xin Mo. "Then at least I'll stop wondering."

He swung the sword. Its power tore through the fabric of reality—a portal opening black-edged and crackling, leading somewhere deep underground. Somewhere dark and sealed and forgotten.

Binghe stepped through without hesitation.

Whatever truth waited on the other side, he would face it.

The space beyond the portal was cold. Dark. Oppressive in a way that made even the Endless Abyss seem welcoming by comparison.

Binghe stepped through, Xin Mo blazing with power in his hand, and found himself in what could only be described as a tomb for the living. Stone walls carved with suppression arrays so complex they made his eyes hurt to look at directly—layers upon layers of sealing work, the accumulated effort of what must have been dozens of cultivators. Chains of spiritual energy crackled in the darkness, anchored to points he couldn't see, converging on the center of the chamber like a spider's web designed to trap something far more dangerous than any insect.

And at the center of it all—

A man.

He was seated on the ground, his back against the wall, his posture suggesting either deep meditation or utter exhaustion. Perhaps both. Long hair fell around his face in tangles, matted and dull, nothing like the flowing locks Shizun had rendered so lovingly in ink and paint. His robes—what remained of them—were threadbare, faded to a gray that might once have been

black or crimson. His skin had the pallor of someone who hadn't seen sunlight in years. Decades.

Binghe stopped.

This was... not what he'd expected.

The artwork in Shizun's alcove had depicted a figure of devastating beauty and effortless power. A demon emperor in his prime, all sharp smiles and elegant menace, the kind of presence that commanded attention simply by existing. Binghe had spent years measuring himself against that image and wondering how he could possibly compete with *that*—with the magnificent being Shizun had loved enough to immortalize in a hundred different poses.

The man before him looked like a corpse that had forgotten to stop breathing.

Pathetic, something in Binghe whispered. And then, uncomfortably: *Is this what seventeen years of imprisonment does? Is this what I would become, if they caught me and sealed me away?*

He pushed the thought aside.

It didn't matter what Tianlang-Jun looked like now. What mattered was the mark blazing on the man's forehead—visible even through the curtain of tangled hair—the same mark Binghe bore on his own skin.

The mark of the Demon Emperor.

Tianlang-Jun's eyes opened.

They were red. The same shade as Binghe's own when he let his demonic nature surface. But there was something *off* about them—a glitter that seemed too bright, a focus that kept sliding sideways like water on oil.

"Oh," Tianlang-Jun said, his voice rough but carrying an undercurrent of something almost like *delight*. "A visitor. How lovely. I do so enjoy visitors." He tilted his head, studying Binghe with an intensity that made his skin prickle. "Though usually they're not real. Are you real? You seem real. Very solid. Good posture."

Binghe's grip tightened on Xin Mo. "You're Tianlang-Jun."

"I am indeed." The demon emperor's gaze sharpened momentarily—a flash of the intelligence that must have once commanded armies. "And you are... let me guess. Young. Powerful. Wielding Xin Mo, which is *fascinating* because that sword is notoriously difficult to control. And—" His eyes fixed on Binghe's forehead. "Ah. A heavenly demon mark. How interesting."

He said it like they were discussing the weather. Like he wasn't sealed under a mountain, like Binghe wasn't standing there holding his former sword, like any of this was *normal*.

"I'm your son," Binghe said bluntly.

Tianlang-Jun blinked. Then blinked again.

Then he started to laugh.

It was not a pleasant sound. Equal parts genuine amusement and something that scraped against Binghe's nerves like broken glass—too high, too sharp, teetering on the edge of hysteria.

"My *son*," he repeated, the word dissolving into giggles. "My son. Of course. Of *course* you are." He pressed a hand over his eyes, shoulders shaking. "Oh, that's wonderful. That's absolutely wonderful. The universe does have a sense of humor after all."

The laughter trailed off into something that sounded suspiciously like a sob. When Tianlang-Jun looked up again, his eyes were wet.

"Su Xiyan," he said, and the name landed in the space between them like a stone dropped into still water. "You must be Su Xiyan's child. You have her eyes. Her bone structure." His gaze traced over Binghe's face with an uncomfortable intimacy. "Though the hair is all mine. Fluffy. Very fluffy. Good for dramatic windblown moments. She used to tease me about—"

He stopped. His expression flickered—grief, rage, something broken—before smoothing back into that unsettling almost-smile.

"You don't seem surprised," Binghe said. His voice came out harder than he intended.

"Surprised?" Tianlang-Jun's laugh was brittle. "My dear boy, when you've been sealed under a mountain with nothing but your own thoughts for company, very little surprises you anymore. I've had *extensive* time to consider every possible permutation of my failures." He spread his hands—chains clinking, a mockery of a gracious gesture. "Though I'll admit, having a son show up is somewhat unexpected. Are you here to kill me? Because I should warn you, I've already been sealed to the point of near-death. Bit redundant, really."

"I'm not here to kill you." The words felt uncertain even as Binghe spoke them. "I'm here for answers."

"*Answers!*" Tianlang-Jun clapped his hands together with a sound like cracking bones, his face splitting into a grin that didn't reach his eyes. "Oh, I love a good question-and-answer session. Very educational. Though you should know—" He leaned forward conspiratorially, chains rattling. "Isolation does strange things to one's mind. Sometimes I'm not entirely sure what's real and what I've imagined to pass the time. Just the other day, I had an entire conversation with a fox spirit who kept insisting I owed her money. Charming creature. Completely fictional. Very persistent." He frowned slightly, "Though I suppose that might have been last year. Time gets a bit... slippery down here."

He tapped his temple with one finger, humming tunelessly to himself for a moment before his gaze snapped back to Binghe with unsettling focus.

Binghe stared at him. This was the man Shizun had loved? This half-mad wreck?

"Now. Where were we? Ah yes—answers. You want *answers*." He tilted his head, studying Binghe like a curiosity. Like a puzzle to be solved, "So tell me, *son*. What is it you *really* want to know?"

Chapter End Notes

LBH: "This wretched man looks nothing like the paintings."
Also LBH: "Clearly Shizun was painting him in his prime, before the sealing."
LBH's ability to rationalize is truly inspiring.

For everyone who was waiting for Binghe to meet TLJ and realize the art wasn't of him—congratulations, you get to watch him rationalize his way around it instead. Our boy is COMMITTED to the narrative he's built in his head.

Chapter 7: The Kind One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I need to know what happened," Binghe said. "With Su Xiyan."

Something in Tianlang-Jun's face shifted.

The manic energy drained away, leaving behind something cold. Hard. The first glimpse of the demon emperor buried beneath years of isolation.

"She betrayed me," he said softly.

He was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was flat. Empty of everything except calcified bitterness.

"I figured it out in the end, when the trap was sprung. When I realized that everything—every smile, every touch, every whispered promise—had been a lie." His hands clenched into fists, chains clinking. "She played her role so well. Made me believe..." He shook his head. "Made me believe that perhaps demons and humans could actually coexist. That love could bridge that gap."

"Do you regret it?" Binghe asked quietly. "Regret her?"

"Every single day." The answer came immediately. "I regret meeting her. I regret trusting her. I regret believing that what we had was real when it was all just..." He made a vague gesture with his chained hands. "Performance. A role she was playing. Like one of those tragic heroines in romance stories—you know the ones, where the beautiful maiden sacrifices everything for the greater good?" His laugh was hollow. "Except in those stories, the maiden usually feels guilty about it. Has conflicted feelings. Suffers emotionally."

His voice hardened. "Su Xiyan just disappeared. I was nothing but a means to an end to her."

"I want revenge," Tianlang-Jun said suddenly, his eyes lighting with manic intensity. "On Huan Hua Palace. On the cultivation world that set the trap. On everyone who decided that demons were monsters to be sealed away rather than people to be understood." His gaze fixed on Binghe with disturbing focus. "You're powerful. I can feel it. And you have Xin Mo. Together, we could merge the realms!"

Binghe stared at him. "What?"

"Merge them!" Tianlang-Jun's voice rose with fervor. "Demons and humans, forced to coexist! No more borders, no more separation—"

"You're insane."

"—no more hiding what we are! If the realms were one, then demons wouldn't be hunted, wouldn't be sealed away, wouldn't be treated like monsters just for existing!" His chains rattled as he gestured wildly. "Don't you see? It's the only way to fix everything! It would be perfect! Because if the realms are merged, if demons and humans have to coexist, then the hatred would eventually fade. They'd have to find ways to live together. And then—then the one I love won't have to hide what we have. Then we can—we could—"

He stopped, something in his face fracturing as the tenses caught up with him. *Love*. *Can*. *What we have.* Present tense for a love that happened years ago.

Binghe watched his father's face crumble and rebuild itself in the space of a breath. Watched madness and grief war for dominance behind those red eyes.

For a moment, Binghe almost felt something like pity.

It passed.

"No. Your plan would kill thousands. Millions, maybe. Different spiritual pressures, different environments, creatures that can't survive outside their native realm—" He thought of Shizun's lectures on demon beasts, on ecosystems, on the delicate balance of spiritual energy. "You'd destroy both worlds trying to merge them together."

Tianlang-Jun's face fell. "But if they were forced to coexist—"

"They'd die," Binghe said flatly. "And so would any chance of demons being accepted. You'd prove every cultivator right—that demons are destructive monsters who can't be trusted."

Silence.

Tianlang-Jun slumped back against the wall, the manic energy draining away. "You really are smarter than I was," he said quietly. "I spent years perfecting that plan. Years convincing myself it would work."

"It won't." Binghe's contempt was palpable. "Stay here and rot with your delusions."

"Very pragmatic," Tianlang-Jun observed, something of his earlier sharpness returning. "You're smarter than I was at your age. Less idealistic." He paused. "Did you learn that from her? From Su Xiyan?"

"I never knew her." Binghe's voice was cold. "A washerwoman found me and raised me. She was my true mother—the one who was actually there."

Tianlang-Jun's expression flickered, "Did Su Xiyan abandon you too, then?"

"I don't know if she's alive or dead. I never thought about it much." Binghe's lip curled with disgust. "But you're one to talk about abandonment."

Tianlang-Jun went very still. "What are you talking about?"

This was it. The moment Binghe had been building toward since he'd discovered the truth. The question that had haunted him through three years in the Abyss and past three months infiltrating Huan Hua Palace.

"Before Su Xiyan," Binghe said carefully. "Before you fell for the trap. Was there anyone else? Anyone you... cared about?"

The manic energy dimmed. Tianlang-Jun's face closed off and he regarded him with something almost like lucidity. "Why would you ask that?"

"Just answer the question." Binghe's hands clenched on Xin Mo. "Was there someone? Someone you left behind? Someone whose heart you broke when you chose Su Xiyan instead of them?"

Someone like Shizun.

Tianlang-Jun was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, the manic energy had drained away entirely, leaving something raw underneath.

"Before..." His voice had gone distant. Fragmented. "Yes, before. Had to be. Because there was the kind one, and then there was the betrayer. Had to be two different people."

Binghe's heart stuttered. "The kind one?"

"The one who smiled at me. Who didn't flinch when I—" Tianlang-Jun stopped, pressing his fingers against his temples. "Or was that from the story? The one about the scholar and the fox spirit? They blur together. The memories and the stories. I read so many books about human courtship, trying to understand, and now I can't..." He shook his head. "I can't separate them anymore."

"What was their name?" Binghe demanded. "The kind one. The one before Su Xiyan."

"I don't..." Tianlang-Jun's brow furrowed, genuine confusion crossing his face. "There had to be a name. Everyone has a name. Like the maiden in chapter six—what was she called? Plum blossom? Orchid? They're always flower names in the stories."

"This isn't a story!" Binghe's voice cracked. "I'm asking about a real person!"

"But that's just it." Tianlang-Jun's eyes locked onto his with terrible clarity. "How do I tell the difference anymore? I can't remember their face. Can't remember their name. Just the feeling." His voice dropped to a whisper. "This overwhelming certainty that I lost something precious."

Something cold and desperate clawed at Binghe's chest.

"Shen Qingqiu," he said. "Peak Lord of Qing Jing Peak. Was it him? Did you abandon *him* for my mother?"

Tianlang-Jun stared at him with blank incomprehension. "Who?"

The word hit Binghe like a physical blow. "*What*?"

"Shen Qingqiu," Tianlang-Jun repeated slowly, rolling the syllables around his mouth. It was like he was tasting wine, waiting for memory to bloom into recognition. But his eyes remained empty. Blank. "I have absolutely no idea who that is. I've never heard that name in my life."

"You're lying." Binghe stepped closer, Xin Mo humming dangerously in his grip. "You have to know him. You must have—"

"I'm telling you, I've never met anyone by that name." Tianlang-Jun's confusion seemed genuine. "I didn't interact much with Cang Qiong Mountain. They were isolationist. I certainly never knew any of their peak lords."

"He might not have been a peak lord then," Meng Mo's voice spoke up in Binghe's mind. *"Shen Qingqiu could have been a disciple back then. Different name. Different title."*

Of course. Of course Shizun wouldn't have held that position yet. Which meant Tianlang-Jun might have known him under another identity entirely.

Another name that Binghe didn't know. One more piece of Shizun's past that belonged to his father instead of to him.

"Then tell me," Binghe said, his voice raw, pleading. "What was the *kind one's* name? The one you left behind?"

Tianlang-Jun's expression shuttered. "I told you. I don't remember."

"You have to remember something!"

"I remember feelings!" Tianlang-Jun's voice rose to match his. "I remember that there was someone gentle before there was someone who destroyed me! But the memories are gone—eaten away by years of being trapped here, trying to figure out which parts of my life were real and which ones I invented to convince myself I hadn't gone mad!" He slumped back against the wall, suddenly looking every year of his imprisonment.

"I think I loved someone before I was betrayed," he said quietly. "But I can't… Can't remember enough to be certain." His laugh was hollow. "Maybe I invented them. A kind one to balance out the betrayer. A story I told myself. So I could believe I'd had something real once, even if I threw it away."

Binghe stared at his father—at this broken man who couldn't even remember the person he'd abandoned.

The kind one.

And didn't that describe Shizun perfectly? The gentle voice, the careful hands, the softness hidden beneath the aloof exterior?

But if Tianlang-Jun couldn't remember—if the years had erased everything but the vague shape of loss—then Shizun's devotion, all those paintings and sculptures, years of secret mourning...

It had all been for someone who didn't even remember his name.

"I should kill you," Binghe said. "For what you did. For abandoning someone who cared about you. For making choices that led to all of this."

"You probably should," Tianlang-Jun agreed. "But you won't."

"No." Binghe's grip tightened on Xin Mo. "Because killing you would be mercy. And you don't deserve mercy."

Tianlang-Jun laughed—that broken, brittle sound. "Harsh but fair. You really are smarter than I was." He tilted his head. "So what will you do instead? Leave me here to rot? Walk away and forget I exist?"

"I'm going to do what you couldn't," Binghe said coldly. "I'm going to conquer the demon realm. Unite the territories. Become something greater than you ever were."

"Ambitious." Tianlang-Jun's eyes glittered. "And then what? Rule from a throne of bones? That gets tedious after a while, trust me."

"And then I'm going to take over Huan Hua Palace. Expose their crimes. Destroy them from within." Binghe smiled, sharp and cold. "I already have them eating out of my hand. By the time they realize the truth, it will be too late."

"Revenge." Tianlang-Jun nodded slowly. "I approve. They deserve everything you can give them."

"I'm not doing it for your approval." Binghe turned away, raising Xin Mo. "Stay here and rot. I have work to do."

"And Shen Qingqiu?" Tianlang-Jun's voice stopped him. "What about that peak lord you were so desperate to ask about?"

Binghe didn't turn around. But his shoulders tensed.

"When I've conquered the demon realm," he said quietly, "when I've destroyed Huan Hua Palace and exposed their crimes—the cultivation world will learn that their precious Peak Lord Shen had... connections to demons. To me. To you, apparently, though you can't even remember him."

"And then?"

"And then he'll have nowhere to go." Binghe's voice was soft. Almost gentle. "His sect will turn on him. The cultivation world will exile him. He'll be alone, hunted, desperate for protection."

He looked back over his shoulder, and his smile was terrible.

"And I'll be there. The only one who can keep him safe." His eyes glittered. "He'll come to me because there won't be any *other* choice. And then—then he'll finally see *me*. Not your shadow. Not whoever you were to him. Just me."

Tianlang-Jun stared at his son with something like recognition. "That's... remarkably calculating."

Binghe's smile sharpened. "Goodbye, Father. Enjoy your prison."

He swung Xin Mo, tearing open a portal—and stepped through without looking back.

The portal closed, leaving the prison in darkness.

Tianlang-Jun sat in silence for a long moment, staring at the space where his son had stood.

"Well," he said finally, to the shadows. "That was interesting."

Zhuzhi-Lang materialized from the corner, his serpentine features troubled. "Junshang, that boy—"

"My son," Tianlang-Jun corrected, sounding almost pleased. "Su Xiyan's child. Though he seems to take after her more than me. Very serious. Very intense." He paused. "Very possessive."

"He plans to expose Huan Hua Palace's crimes," Zhuzhi-Lang said carefully. "To destabilize the cultivation world. And he mentioned someone—Shen Qingqiu—"

"Never heard of him." Tianlang-Jun waved a hand. "Though apparently I should have. My son got quite emotional about it." His expression flickered, something almost lucid passing through his eyes. "Do you think I knew someone by that name, nephew? Before the sealing? Because honestly, I can't tell anymore what's real and what I've read in books."

Zhuzhi-Lang hesitated. "Junshang... I know this name."

Tianlang-Jun sat up straighter.

"When I was searching for the Sun-Moon Dew Mushroom seeds," Zhuzhi-Lang continued, "I encountered a cultivator from Cang Qiong Mountain. A peak lord. He had every reason to kill me. But he spared my life. Showed mercy to a demon when no one else would have."

"Did he now?" Tianlang-Jun's voice had gone soft. Wondering.

"His name was Shen Qingqiu."

Silence stretched between them.

"The kind one," Tianlang-Jun murmured. "A peak lord who shows mercy to demons. Who apparently loved me—" He stopped, shaking his head. "Or maybe I'm mixing things up again. Maybe that's from a story. The gentle maiden who loves a monster..."

He trailed off, fingers tapping an uneven rhythm against his chains. His lips moved soundlessly, like he was sorting through pages only he could see.

Then his eyes sharpened.

"This Shen Qingqiu," Tianlang-Jun said suddenly. "What does he look like?"

Zhuzhi-Lang's scales flushed a faint pink. "Junshang?"

"His appearance, nephew. Is he handsome? Beautiful? Pleasantly average?" Tianlang-Jun waved a hand impatiently. "If I apparently abandoned this person for Su Xiyan, I need to understand what I was working with. Was I trading up? Trading down? Making a lateral move?"

"He is..." Zhuzhi-Lang paused, his flush deepening. "Refined. Elegant. He has a... a graceful bearing. Very—" He stopped, looking anywhere but at his uncle. "He is considered attractive, yes."

"Considered attractive," Tianlang-Jun repeated, delighted. "Nephew, you're *blushing*. You're actually blushing. Oh, this peak lord must be *stunning*."

"I am simply describing—"

"Was there flowing hair? Delicate features? Eyes like limpid pools of autumn water, as they say in the novels?"

"...His eyes are green," Zhuzhi-Lang admitted reluctantly. "And yes. His hair is... very fine."

Tianlang-Jun sat back, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. "Well, well. It seems my past self had excellent taste." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "A beautiful, merciful peak lord who apparently pined for me long enough that my son is having a crisis about it. How intriguing." He sighed dramatically. "And I can't remember a single thing about him. How tragic. How *romantic*."

"Junshang—"

"I must have been devastatingly charming," Tianlang-Jun continued, ignoring him. "To win the heart of such a beauty. Before I ruined everything by chasing after Su Xiyan, of course." He sighed dramatically. "The follies of youth. Or middle age. However old I was. Time is slippery."

"Junshang." Zhuzhi-Lang's voice was careful. "Your son's plan. If he exposes Huan Hua Palace, if he reveals that Shen Qingqiu has connections to demons—"

"The cultivation world will turn on him," Tianlang-Jun finished. His eyes had gone bright again, but this time with something sharper than madness. "Exile. Persecution. A beautiful

peak lord, hunted and alone, with nowhere to turn..."

"He showed me mercy," Zhuzhi-Lang said quietly. "I owe him a debt."

Tianlang-Jun's smile spread slowly across his face.

"Oh, nephew," he breathed. "This is *perfect*."

"Junshang?"

"Don't you see?" Tianlang-Jun clapped his hands together, chains rattling with glee. "It's like one of those romance plots! The loyal retainer repaying a debt of kindness! The beautiful protagonist caught between competing suitors! The dashing rescue!"

Zhuzhi-Lang frowned. "I'm not trying to—"

"My son plans to corner Shen Qingqiu. To leave him no choice but to accept his *protection*." Tianlang-Jun spat the word like it was poison. "To trap him through circumstance and call it love. Very calculating. Very clever." His eyes met Zhuzhi-Lang's. "But what if someone got there first?"

"Got there... first?"

"You want to repay your debt, don't you? To save the man who showed you mercy?" Tianlang-Jun leaned forward, intent. "My son thinks he has all the time in the world. Thinks Shen Qingqiu will have no options but him. But if *you* reach him first—if *you* offer him sanctuary before my son can spring his trap—"

"I would just be repaying a kindness," Zhuzhi-Lang said slowly. "Protecting someone who protected me."

"Exactly!" Tianlang-Jun beamed. "The faithful retainer, saving the beautiful peak lord from a possessive prince! Very romantic. Very dramatic." He paused, tilting his head. "You'll need to work on your princess carry technique, of course."

"Junshang, I'm just repaying a debt."

"Of course you are." Tianlang-Jun's smile was far too knowing. "And who knows? Perhaps there will be no spark between you two. Perhaps he'll be grateful but not interested. And in that case—" He gestured to himself with a flourish. "—perhaps I can rekindle whatever romance I've apparently forgotten about! Wouldn't that be like one of those stories where true love conquers lost memories?"

He clasped his hands together, looking genuinely delighted by this possibility.

"Oh, this is going to be magnificent. My son conquering the demon realm, thinking he has all the time in the world, while you prepare your heroic rescue!"

"Junshang," Zhuzhi-Lang said carefully. "Perhaps we should consider—"

"No, no, don't ruin it with overthinking!" Tianlang-Jun waved him off. "Just prepare, nephew. Get ready for your grand rescue. And when the time comes—when that beautiful peak lord is alone and desperate and in need of saving—you'll be there!"

Zhuzhi-Lang looked at his uncle—at the madness and the cunning intertwined so thoroughly he couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

"And what about you, Junshang? What will you do?"

Tianlang-Jun's expression went distant. Almost wistful.

"I'll get free," he said softly. "And then...I'll meet this Shen Qingqiu myself. See if seeing his face brings anything back." He tapped his temple, smiling crookedly. "The kind one. Maybe he'll look at me and I'll suddenly remember everything—like in that story where the amnesiac prince sees his true love and all his memories return in a flood of emotion." His gaze drifted to somewhere Zhuzhi-Lang couldn't follow. "Maybe seeing him will help me remember who I was before all this madness."

Zhuzhi-Lang said nothing. But he thought about Shen Qingqiu's mercy. About Luo Binghe's terrible smile. About debts owed and kindness repaid.

"I'll need time to plan," he said finally.

"We have time." Tianlang-Jun settled back against the wall, gesturing to the mushroom growing at his feet, pulsing faintly with spiritual energy. "The body will be ready in less than a year. Plenty of time for you to plan your heroic rescue."

In the darkness of the prison, surrounded by sealing arrays and chains, Tianlang-Jun began to hum tunelessly to himself.

Zhuzhi-Lang lingered a moment longer, then slipped back into the shadows. He had preparations to make. Information to gather. A debt to repay.

He would watch this Shen Qingqiu. Learn his routines, his vulnerabilities, the best way to approach him when the time came. Not as a suitor—despite his uncle's mad fantasies—but as someone offering protection. Sanctuary. A way out when the cultivation world inevitably turned on him.

That was all.

That was all it needed to be.

Zhuzhi-Lang slipped back into the shadows. He had preparations to make.

Alone again, Tianlang-Jun began to hum—something cheerful, an old romance ballad about star-crossed lovers reunited across impossible odds.

The mushroom at his feet pulsed with quiet power, growing stronger by the day.

Not long until freedom.

Until he could see how this story ended.

He couldn't wait.

Chapter End Notes

The big question on people's minds was: Is TLJ going to actually admit that he doesn't know who SQQ is, or is he going to play along with everything LBH says because he loves drama?

The answer is yes.

TLJ's brain said "I can't have loved someone who betrayed me, so there must have been a KIND one before her" and Binghe's brain said "YES THAT'S SHIZUN" and they're both so confident.

Chapter 8: Better Than Him

Chapter Notes

I just want to say—thank you SO MUCH for all the love and kudos and comments. Like, genuinely, comments get me through the day. Comments are my lifeblood. My sustenance. My reason to keep editing at 2am.

This fic has been so much fun to write and honestly getting to experience it again through your comments is like reliving the joy all over again. You all losing your minds over every new misunderstanding is exactly what I was going for. I love that you're all on this roller coaster with me!

Quick reminder that the whole story is drafted and I'm posting as fast as I can edit. These are unbeta'd, so If something doesn't make sense, please simply pretend it does, squint and keep going. Thank you for your cooperation. I love and appreciate you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shang Qinghua had been having a truly terrible day even before Mobei-Jun collapsed in his office, bleeding from wounds that should have killed him three times over.

"Fuck," Shang Qinghua said eloquently, dropping the supply manifests he'd been pretending to read. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*—my king, what—"

Mobei-Jun's eyes blazed with fury even as his legs buckled. "Qinghua," he spat out, voice like gravel scraped across iron. "You will still... serve me..."

"Yes, yes, serving, definitely serving," Shang Qinghua babbled, already scrambling to support the demon lord's weight. Which was considerable. And very *bloody*, given the gashes that crisscrossed his torso like someone had used him for calligraphy practice. "Can you not bleed on the paperwork? That's a week's worth of requisition forms and—no, you know what, bleed everywhere, it's fine, we'll just—"

Mobei-Jun weakly grabbed the front of his robes with one bloodstained hand. The gesture should have been threatening. It mostly just smeared demon lord viscera across Shang Qinghua's second-best outer robe.

"I have been defeated," Mobei-Jun growled, "but you still serve me, even as we will serve *him*."

"What?" Shang Qinghua asked, frantically trying to remember if he'd stocked any medical supplies in this office or if he'd used them all last month when that thing with the supply caravan went south. Spoiler: he'd used them all. "My king, you need to tell me who did this."

A bad feeling settled in his gut, cold and heavy, because there was only one being in the demon realm who could defeat Mobei-Jun in single combat. But it was far too early. The timeline was all wrong.

"Tianlang-Jun's son."

Shang Qinghua's brain stuttered to a halt. "I'm sorry, *what*?"

But Mobei-Jun was already unconscious, slumping against Shang Qinghua with enough force to send them both crashing to the floor. Shang Qinghua let out a wheeze as the air left his lungs, pinned under several hundred pounds of bleeding demon lord like the world's worst weighted blanket.

This was fine. This was totally fine. He'd just patch up his king, and figure out what the *hell* was happening with the plot—

The air in front of him suddenly split open.

Not metaphorically. The actual *air* split, reality tearing like fabric caught on a nail, and through the rift stepped Luo Binghe. The crimson demonic mark blazed on his forehead like a brand. In his hand, crackling with dark energy that made Shang Qinghua's spiritual senses scream in terror, was Xin Mo.

The protagonist. *His* protagonist. Standing in Shang Qinghua's poorly organized office, looking like he'd crawled out of the Endless Abyss—which, technically, he had—and decided that casual reality-warping was just how he traveled now.

Shang Qinghua squeaked in fright and feigned fainting. It was his default response to authority figures, and it had saved his life more times than he could count.

A sharp slap connected with his cheek.

So much for that plan.

"I didn't do anything!" Shang Qinghua yelped, abandoning the ruse with all the dignity of a man who had never possessed any to begin with.

"Relax." Luo Binghe's voice was pleasant. His eyes were completely demonic red and menacing.

He crouched down, examining Mobei-Jun's wounds with detached interest, like a cat inspecting a mouse it had already decided not to eat.

"I'm not going to kill you," he said. A pause. A smile. "Yet."

The "yet" did *not* make Shang Qinghua feel better.

"Mobei-Jun fought well," Luo Binghe continued conversationally, as if they were discussing the weather and not the unconscious bleeding demon currently crushing Shang Qinghua's legs. "Better than I expected, honestly. He'll live to serve as my general."

"What do you want?" Shang Qinghua managed. His voice came out approximately three octaves higher than he would have liked.

Luo Binghe's smile was sharp enough to cut. "I'll make this simple. You're a spy, aren't you, Shang-*shishu*?" he said, drawing out the honorific just enough to make it mocking. "I need someone who can move between worlds, who knows what's happening in Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. Someone who can bring me... *information*."

Self-preservation instincts kicking in with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, Shang Qinghua attempted to bow from his position on the floor. It mostly just looked like he was having a seizure. "Yes, Junshang! I can tell you about all the peaks, their weaknesses, the patrol rotations, the best times to—"

"Shen Qingqiu." Luo Binghe's voice had gone quiet. Dangerous. "Tell me about my Shizun."

"What about him?" Shang Qinghua asked weakly.

"*Everything*." Luo Binghe's eyes had gone distant, focused on something Shang Qinghua couldn't see. "I want to know everything he does. Everyone he talks to. What he eats, where he goes, what he's thinking." His hand clenched around Xin Mo's hilt until his knuckles went white. "Shang-shishu, I spent three years in the Abyss. *Three years*. And do you know what I thought about?"

Shang Qinghua shook his head mutely. He had a feeling he knew the answer, and it was exactly the kind of obsessive protagonist behavior he'd written into *Proud Immortal Demon Way* thinking it was cool and not at all concerning.

Past-him was an idiot.

"Him," Luo Binghe said simply. "Every day. Every hour. Every time I thought I would die." His voice cracked slightly. "He looked at me and saw—" He stopped. Started again. "Did he ever see *me*, Shang-shishu? Or was I just an echo of someone else he couldn't have?"

Shang Qinghua's brain, which had been operating in pure survival mode, suddenly registered the implications of that question. *Someone he couldn't have.*

What the actual *hell* had Cucumber-bro gotten himself into?

"I don't—" Shang Qinghua started, genuinely confused.

"I just need to know," Luo Binghe interrupted. "I need to understand. Why he—" His voice cracked and trailed off.

Shang Qinghua looked at the demon lord standing in his ransacked office, reality-warping sword in hand, eyes desperate despite the power radiating off him. The silence stretched, awkward and uncomfortable, until Shang Qinghua did what he always did in the face of awkward silences and terrifying authority figures.

He put on his best customer service smile.

"Of course, Junshang! I will report whatever information you want!"

"Good." Luo Binghe's eyes cleared, focus sharpening. He leaned in close, voice dropping to a whisper. "Then tell me, Shang-shishu..."

"Yes?"

"When you were disciples," Luo Binghe said softly, "what was Shizun's name? His name before he became Peak Lord."

Of all the things to ask, why would he want to know *that*? "Shen Jiu," Shang Qinghua said carefully. "His name was Shen Jiu."

Something flickered across Luo Binghe's face. "Shen Jiu," he repeated slowly. "And did he... did Shen Jiu have any lovers back then? Anyone he was close to?"

Shang Qinghua blinked. Once. Twice. He wasn't sure he'd heard that right. *Excuse me, what?* That was not on the list of probable interrogation topics. Revenge, sure. Accusation, maybe. But love-life inquiries? Oh. *Oh no*. This was *not* the revenge question Shang Qinghua had been expecting. This was the jealousy question. And he was *not* equipped.

"“I—uh—I…” Shang Qinghua's hands fluttered helplessly before finding refuge at the back of his neck. “I mean, I wasn't there for most of it, okay? I think he was close to Liu-shidi? But—not like, you know, close close! Just—uh—well, from what I heard, it was like close…” He swallowed, forcing a weak laugh. “In a ‘sword to the throat every time they met’ kind of way? You know, that sort of… intense thing?”

He was rambling. He knew he was rambling. But the silence was worse, and Luo Binghe's face was doing *things*, and Shang Qinghua just kept talking because that was what he did when he was nervous.

“But, you know, everyone—uh, everyone knows that Shen-shixiong, um, went to brothels sometimes. Which Liu Qingge hated, obviously, and would yell at him about all the time—like, really yell, in front of everyone—hah. So, yeah, that was… that was a thing.”

Luo Binghe went perfectly, dangerously still. The kind of still that felt like mercy only because he hadn't chosen otherwise yet.

Shang Qinghua's mouth snapped shut. Whatever survival instinct he had left screamed at him not to say another word.

…

Brothels.

The word struck Luo Binghe like a hammer, reverberating through the hollowness left in its wake. Shizun, *his* Shizun—elegant, refined, *beautiful* Shizun—visiting brothels. That absurdity should have made him laugh.

But the longer he turned it over, the more it fit.

It fit all too perfectly.

And the shape of that realization burned.

Tianlang-Jun.

Of *course* that's where they would have met. The Demon Emperor couldn't exactly walk into Cang Qiong Mountain. A brothel was safer—lust made the perfect disguise. No one would question it. They'd gossip, laugh, make crude jokes. They'd think Shizun was just another cultivator who couldn't keep his hands to himself. And all the while, he'd been meeting his demon lover under the cover of human sin.

The thought of it—of his elegant Shizun having to sneak around and let his reputation *suffer*, shoulder judgment and scorn just to meet his lover in secret—

Rage bloomed, hot and vicious, tearing through the stunned hollow in Binghe's chest.

"He made Shizun lower himself to meeting in brothels?! "

He turned and drove Xin Mo through Shang Qinghua's table. The wood exploded into splinters, the sword's dark energy eating through it like acid.

Shang Qinghua yelped and tried to scramble backward despite the still-unconscious Mobei-Jun pinning him. "I—what—who—Junshang?"

Binghe barely heard him. Tianlang-Jun had made Shen Qingqiu meet him in *brothels* and let his Shizun's reputation suffer for the sake of secrecy. Had put Shizun in a position where he was judged and scorned.

And then the bastard had abandoned him for Su Xiyan.

Tianlang-Jun had left Shizun with a ruined reputation and a broken heart and sculptures mourning a love that had been thrown aside like garbage.

Unforgivable.

"He made him damage his own reputation. Made him—" He stopped, breathing hard. "The *disrespect*."

"Who are you talking about?" Shang Qinghua asked, sounding genuinely bewildered.

But Binghe wasn't listening. "I'll be better," he said. Almost to himself. "I'll be *stronger*."

He stopped. Forced himself to breathe. To think. To *plan* rather than rage.

He turned back to Shang Qinghua, eyes clearing into something sharper.

"You're going to tell me everything. Every detail about Shizun's current situation. Who visits him. Who speaks to him. What he does with his time." His voice dropped. "*Everything*. Especially his interactions with Liu Qingge."

His Shizun was *alone*. Liu Qingge was probably circling like a predator scenting prey. And somewhere, Tianlang-Jun might find a way free of his prison.

Binghe raised Xin Mo, and another portal tore open in reality.

"And Shang-shishu?" He paused in the doorway between worlds. "If anything happens to him while you're supposed to be watching—if he gets hurt because you failed to warn me—"

His eyes fixed on Shang Qinghua with absolute focus.

"Well. Let's hope that doesn't happen."

He stepped through the portal and was gone.

Binghe's father had made catastrophically poor choices. Had thrown away something precious for a lie. Had let his lover's reputation be ruined while conducting a secret affair in *brothels*, of all places. Like Shizun was something to be ashamed of.

And now, Tianlang-Jun was mad and broken and unable to even remember the person he'd abandoned.

Binghe would *not* make the same mistakes.

When he returned to the human realm—and he *would* return—he would claim Shizun *properly*. *Openly*. Would give him the respect and devotion that Tianlang-Jun had failed to provide.

He'd show Shen Qingqiu that Luo Binghe was *nothing* like his father.

That when Binghe loved someone, he didn't abandon them.

He *kept* them.

No matter what it took.

The Northern Desert was cold.

Not cold the way humans experienced cold—that temporary discomfort that could be solved with layers and fires. This cold was *old*. It sank into bones and stayed there, crystallizing blood and freezing spiritual pathways, turning even high-level demons into sculpture if they weren't careful.

Luo Binghe walked through it like it was a mild autumn breeze.

Xin Mo hummed at his side, a constant presence now—a second heartbeat, a whisper of chaos and conquest that synced with the demon blood in his veins. The sword wanted things. Wanted destruction, and dominion, and the subjugation of all who dared oppose its wielder.

For once, Binghe and the sword were in perfect agreement.

Behind him, Mobei-Jun followed. Not the defeated, bleeding creature from weeks ago, but something rebuilt in the fires of loss and reshaped into a weapon that now pointed in whatever direction Binghe chose.

Mobei-Jun understood only one language: power. Binghe had proven, definitively, that he spoke it fluently. And that, more than any oath or threat, bound him to Binghe's service.

"The northern clans will resist," Mobei-Jun said. His voice was flat, offering information rather than opinion. "They've been without an emperor since Tianlang-Jun's fall. They won't submit easily to another."

"They'll bow," Binghe said. "Or they'll break."

It wasn't a threat. It was simply fact.

"You're enjoying this," Meng Mo's voice echoed in the back of his mind, somewhere between observation and accusation.

Binghe didn't bother responding. What was there to say? He *was* enjoying it. The clarity of conquest. The simplicity of power. Every clan that fell was another step toward the throne, another brick in the foundation he was building.

Another layer of protection for when he finally returned for what was his.

The battlefield stretched before them, littered with the broken bodies of demons who had made the mistake of thinking numbers could compensate for the gap in their strength.

They couldn't.

Binghe wiped Xin Mo clean on the robes of the nearest corpse—some minor clan lord who had been stupid enough to challenge him directly. The demon's face was frozen in an expression of surprise, as if he still couldn't believe what had happened in those final seconds.

"The other clans will hear of this," Mobei-Jun said from behind him. He was surveying the carnage with something that might have been awe. It was difficult to parse emotions from that stoic face. "They'll unite against you."

"Let them." Binghe sheathed his sword. "I want them united. I want them to throw everything they have at me, all at once, so when I break them, everyone will know."

"Know what?"

Binghe turned. His eyes had gone fully black again, demon blood surging through his veins, power crackling around him like a storm waiting to break. He looked out over the field of corpses and saw, not destruction, but a declaration.

"That the demon realm has a new emperor," he said. "And that his protection extends to everyone and everything he claims as his own."

He thought of Shizun. Of green eyes and elegant hands and a secret room full of sculptures. Of brothels and broken hearts.

"Including one particular Peak Lord," he added softly, "who will never have to hide his heart again."

Mobei-Jun was silent. Then: "Which."

It came out clipped. Almost tense, which was strange—Mobei-Jun didn't do tense.

"Which?" Binghe repeated, caught off guard by the question.

"Which Peak Lord."

Binghe stared at him. The demon lord's face was as expressionless as ever, but there was something in the set of his shoulders. A stillness that went beyond his usual stillness.

"Shen Qingqiu," Binghe said slowly. "Qing Jing Peak." He paused, something clicking into place. "*Not* An Ding."

Mobei-Jun inclined his head. If Binghe hadn't been watching closely, he might have missed the way the tension bled out of him—a fraction of a degree, barely perceptible.

"Shang Qinghua is useful," Mobei-Jun said. "As a spy."

"I'm sure he is."

"He has value. For information."

"You mentioned."

Mobei-Jun's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "That is all."

Coming from Mobei-Jun, that was practically a love poem.

Binghe filed the observation away for later. Everyone had their weaknesses, it seemed.

"Keep your spy," Binghe said, turning back toward the battlefield. "Shen Qingqiu is mine. We have no conflict."

"The southern territories next," Mobei-Jun said, smoothly redirecting. "The heat demons will be more difficult. They fight differently."

"Then we'll adapt." Binghe began walking, stepping over bodies without looking down. "Send word ahead. Tell them what happened here. Give them a chance to surrender."

"And if they refuse?"

Binghe smiled. It was not a kind expression.

"Then they'll serve as an example for the ones who come after."

Three months later, an unbroken string of victories that had sent shockwaves through the demon realm.

Binghe surveyed the map spread across the war table—a sprawling thing of monster hide and demon ink, territories marked in colors that shifted as allegiances changed. Red for conquered. Black for resistant. Gray for those still deciding which way to fall.

There was a lot more red than there had been a month ago.

"The western alliance is fracturing," Sha Hualing reported, tracing a lacquered nail along the border territories. She'd shown up two weeks into the Southern campaign, drawn by the scent of victory like a shark to blood. Binghe had let her stay. She was vicious, ambitious, and smart enough to know that opposing him was suicide. That made her useful. "Three of the minor lords have already sent envoys. They want terms."

"Give them terms," Binghe said. "Generous ones. Make it known that those who submit willingly are rewarded."

"And those who don't?"

"Make examples." He didn't look up from the map. "But not wasteful ones. Dead demons can't serve."

Sha Hualing's smile was all teeth. "Understood, Junshang."

Mobei-Jun stood silent at the other end of the table, a pillar of frost and contained violence. He hadn't spoken in the last hour, but his presence said enough. The northern territories were secure. His uncle's remaining allies had either bent the knee or been ground into the permafrost.

Two generals. Two fronts. Two perfectly capable commanders who could maintain momentum without him.

Which meant it was time.

"I'm returning to the human realm," Binghe said.

Sha Hualing's eyes widened. "Now? Junshang, the campaign—"

"Will continue without me." He rolled up the map with precise, deliberate movements. "Mobei-Jun will command the north. You'll take the west. Consolidate what we've gained. Apply pressure but don't overextend."

"For how long?"

"I'll return when I can and if something requires my attention here." He tucked the map into his robes. "Xin Mo makes distance irrelevant. I can be in both places as needed."

Sha Hualing looked like she wanted to argue—the idea of their new emperor splitting his focus clearly didn't sit well with her. But she was smart enough to recognize that this wasn't a discussion.

"Where in the human realm?"

"Huan Hua Palace." There was no point in secrecy. They'd need to know where to reach him. "The Old Palace Master sees me as a traumatized disciple he can shape. I intend to let him keep thinking that."

Sha Hualing's eyes gleamed with understanding. "You're positioning yourself."

"The cultivation world won't bow to a demon emperor." Binghe's voice was flat. "But they might bow to a hero. A tragic young cultivator who survived the Endless Abyss, who rose through the ranks of their most prestigious sect, who proved himself time and again in their petty tournaments and political games."

"And when you have their trust?"

"Then I'll have their throats."

Sha Hualing laughed—a sharp, delighted sound. "Junshang, you're more demon than half the court."

Binghe didn't smile.

The demon realm gave him an army. The human realm would give him legitimacy. He needed both.

And there was more to it than strategy. Huan Hua Palace was where Su Xiyan had trained. Where the trap had been laid for Tianlang-Jun. Where the answers to Shizun's heartbreak might still be buried in old records and older memories—details his father had been too mad to remember, secrets the Old Palace Master might let slip to his promising young disciple.

But most importantly, it was where Binghe needed to be *seen*. The tragic survivor. The young man who had crawled out of the Abyss with no allegiance to demons, no agenda beyond gratitude to his saviors.

His cover was too valuable to abandon. Not when Shizun was still in the human realm, still vulnerable to the cultivation world's politics and judgment.

When Binghe finally revealed himself, it would be on his terms. With an army at his back and enough power that no one would dare touch what was his.

“But the Old Palace Master actually trusts you?" Sha Hualing asked, skeptical.

"He thinks I'm useful." Binghe's smile was thin. "He's not wrong."

"And if something happens while you're gone? If we need to reach you?"

Binghe pulled a small jade token from his robes—one of a matched pair, attuned to his spiritual signature. He tossed it to Mobei-Jun, who caught it without looking.

"Emergencies only," Binghe said. "I'll know if you use it."

Mobei-Jun tucked the token away. "Understood."

"Don't lose ground. Don't start wars I haven't approved. And—" He looked at Sha Hualing directly. "Don't touch the human realm. Not yet. Not until I say."

She raised her hands in mock surrender. "I wouldn't dream of it, Junshang."

He didn't believe her. But Mobei-Jun would keep her in check. That was half the reason Binghe had structured the command this way—two ambitious generals, each watching the other, neither able to make a move without the other knowing.

Balance through mutual suspicion. It was elegant, in its way.

Binghe turned toward the door, then paused. "One more thing."

"Junshang?"

"Shang Qinghua will continue to send reports. On Cang Qiong. On—" *Shizun*. "On the sects. Make sure those reports reach me, wherever I am."

Mobei-Jun inclined his head. "I will see to it personally."

Of course you will, Binghe thought. *Any excuse to visit your "useful spy."*

He didn't say it aloud. Some observations were better kept private.

Luo Binghe walked into a moonlit courtyard, elegant pavilions rising around him like sleeping beasts. Huan Hua Palace. The seat of cultivation righteousness, built on lies and the bones of betrayed demons.

Binghe adjusted his expression—softened it, dulled the predatory edge, let something younger and more vulnerable surface. The lost disciple. The traumatized survivor. The boy who still flinched at shadows and needed guidance from his elders.

It was a performance. But he'd learned from the best, hadn't he? Shen Qingqiu had worn masks for decades. Had hidden his broken heart behind cold elegance and cutting remarks, fooling everyone around him.

Binghe could do the same. Would do the same, for as long as it took.

He thought of his Shizun, alone on Qing Jing Peak. Thought of that secret room, all those sculptures dedicated to a man who didn't deserve them.

When he took Shen Qingqui—when he claimed him openly—the cultivation world needed to already be on its knees. They needed to be unable to touch him. Unable to whisper, or judge, or drag his name through the mud the way they had when Tianlang-Jun made him hide their love in brothels and shadows.

Binghe wouldn't let that happen. Not again. Not ever.

Wait for me, he thought. *I'm building this for you. All of it.*

The demon realm. The human realm. Every throne, every alliance, every drop of blood I spill.

It's all for you.

He schooled his features into something appropriately humble and stepped out of the shadows.

He had an empire to build. And a heart to claim.

Both would be his before the year was out.

Chapter End Notes

SQH: brothels—
LBH: [loading conspiracy.exe]
LBH: [complete]
LBH: my father made shizun hide their love and I will never forgive him

LBH: Including one particular Peak Lord—
MBJ: WHICH
LBH: ...
MBJ: ...
MBJ: I mean. Which. For strategic purposes.
The way MBJ heard "Peak Lord" and had to immediately confirm it wasn't his before he could relax. My guy. My dude. You are not subtle.

Chapter 9: Just A Little Longer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The reports came in fragments.

Whispers passed between disciples who thought their peak lord couldn't hear. Rumors drifting up from Cang Qiong's lower peaks like smoke. And, most reliably, Shang Qinghua's increasingly unhinged visits.

"He's taken the North," Shang Qinghua had gasped six months ago, bursting into Shen Qingqiu's bamboo house without knocking. He'd looked like a man who hadn't slept in days—robes rumpled, hair escaping its topknot, dark circles under his eyes that spoke of spiritual exhaustion and emotional devastation in equal measure. "Luo Binghe defeated my king like he wasn't the most powerful ice demon in the demon realm, and my king barely survived—"

"Your king," Shen Qingqiu had repeated flatly.

"Shut up, that's not the point." Shang Qinghua had collapsed onto the meditation cushion by the window—Binghe's cushion, the one Shen Qingqiu still couldn't bring himself to move—and buried his face in his hands. "The point is he's conquering everything! And I have to report to him now, on top of reporting to Mobei-Jun, on top of running An Ding Peak, on top of—" He'd made a vague, despairing gesture. "All of this!"

Shen Qingqiu had poured him tea. It seemed like the thing to do.

"Why are you even here?" he'd asked. "If you're so busy being everyone's spy?"

"Because my son wants updates on you!" Shang Qinghua had grabbed the teacup like a lifeline. "Constant updates! 'What did Shen Qingqiu eat for breakfast, Shang Qinghua? Did Shen Qingqiu leave his peak today, Shang Qinghua? Has anyone been visiting Shen Qingqiu, Shang Qinghua?' Like I don't have enough to do!" He'd drained the tea in one gulp. "I'm going to die. I'm actually going to die. I survived transmigrating into my own shitty novel just to die from exhaustion and stress."

"Tragic," Shen Qingqiu had said, refilling his cup. "Also, if you're claiming Luo Binghe as your son, does that make Mobei-Jun your son too? Since you created him?"

Shang Qinghua had frozen, teacup halfway to his lips.

"That's—that's different. Mobei-Jun is—he's not—" His face did something complicated. "That's completely different."

"You literally designed his ice powers. His demon heritage. His—"

"We're not talking about this." Shang Qinghua had set down the teacup with a decisive click. "We're talking about your problems. Which are many. And pressing."

That had been six months ago.

Since then, Shang Qinghua had appeared more times than Shen Qingqiu could count—each visit shorter and more frantic than the last, each report more alarming.

The South had fallen. Dozens of warlords, crushed one by one.

The East was buckling. Guerrilla tactics failing against overwhelming force.

And now, according to the crumpled note that had been shoved under Shen Qingqiu's door at some ungodly hour of the morning:

West surrendered. He killed 5 generals. Single combat. No breaks between. I haven't slept in 40 hours. If I die, get rid of what's under my bed and tell no one about it.

Shen Qingqiu stared at the note.

Five generals. Single combat. No breaks.

The countdown he'd been dreading since Binghe crawled out of the Abyss two years early was accelerating.

In the original novel, Luo Binghe had spent five years clawing his way through the Endless Abyss—five years of torment and transformation before emerging as the blackened, all-powerful demon lord who would reshape both realms. His conquest of the demon territories had taken another year or so after that, a systematic campaign of blood and fire that Airplane had lovingly detailed across approximately three hundred chapters of increasingly ridiculous power escalation.

Luo Binghe had emerged years sooner than he expected. Shen Qingqiu had barely had time to process the news—delivered by a hyperventilating Shang Qinghua—before the conquest began. No pause. No recovery period. Just immediate, relentless expansion, like Binghe had spent those three years in the Abyss not just surviving but *planning.*

And now his conquest was happening at the same breakneck pace as in PIDW. Which meant Shen Qingqiu's already-shortened timeline was shrinking further with every territory that fell.

The math was not in his favor.

If Luo Binghe finished consolidating the demon realm in the next few months—and at this rate, he would—then Shen Qingqiu had perhaps half a year before the protagonist's attention turned fully to the cultivation world.

To revenge.

To *him.*

The mushroom body was progressing. But slowly, too agonizingly slowly. Shang Qinghua thought he could push it to be ready sooner. Maybe even a year, if they were lucky.

The timelines might just align.

If nothing else went wrong.

A knock at his door made him startle badly enough to knock over his untouched tea.

"Shen-shixiong?" Shang Qinghua's voice, higher and more strained than usual. "Are you decent? Please be decent. I don't have time to wait."

Shen Qingqiu looked down at the tea pooling across his desk, soaking into papers he'd been pretending to work on. "Come in."

The door slid open to reveal Shang Qinghua looking, impossibly, *worse* than last time. His robes had achieved new heights of dishevelment, looking like they'd been slept in, fought in, and possibly used as a napkin. The ink stains decorating his hands and clothes had clearly evolved beyond "overworked peak lord" into "unsupervised toddler with access to a calligraphy set."

"I have ten minutes," Shang Qinghua announced, already crossing to the cushion and collapsing onto it. He slumped into the cushion, looking more like a pile of rumpled laundry than a peak lord. "My king wants a report on the Western territories' trade routes, my son wants a report on whether you've eaten today, and I have three hundred requisition forms waiting on my desk that won't sign themselves."

"Your son *and* your king," Shen Qingqiu said mildly. "Quite the family you've built for yourself."

"I will leave. I will turn around and walk out that door and you can find out about the demon realm's political situation from rumors like everyone else."

"Touchy."

"I'm *exhausted.*" Shang Qinghua pulled out his crumpled notes, squinting at his own handwriting. "Okay. Updates. He's still asking about your health. Whether you're eating. Whether you've been sleeping." He paused. "Whether anyone's been 'visiting' you."

"Liu Qingge comes by sometimes."

Shang Qinghua made a noise like a dying animal. "Do you have *any idea* what he did to my furniture when I mentioned Liu Qingge brought you a dead beast and just left it at your door like a cat leaving a bird on someone's pillow."

Shen Qingqiu blinked. "Oh. That *did* happen. I forgot about that." He frowned. "What ever happened to that thing?"

"Ming Fan took care of it," Shang Qinghua said.

"Ming Fan."

"I've recruited him as an asset." Shang Qinghua's voice had gone defensive. "I can't do all this by myself! Do you know how hard it is to keep track of your entire schedule while also running a peak and also not dying every time my king summons me at three in the morning?"

Shen Qingqiu stared at him. "You turned my head disciple into a *spy*."

"I turned your head disciple into a *concerned party* who happens to provide regular reports in exchange for—" Shang Qinghua stopped.

"In exchange for *what*."

"...early access to new chapters of *"The Second Jade's Unbroken Strings*," Shang Qinghua muttered, very fast.

Shen Qingqiu's brain caught up with his ears approximately three seconds too late. "*That* trashy cultivation romance? The one with the—" He made a vague, horrified gesture. "The *guqin string* scenes?"

"It's very popular."

"It's *pornography*."

"It's *artistic* pornography. There's subtext. There's *metaphor*."

"The protagonist uses his spiritual energy to—"

"Metaphor!" Shang Qinghua yelped. "And anyway, everyone reads it, they just won't admit it. I literally saw Liu Qingge panic and shove a copy into his qiankun pouch once."

"*What?*"

"I'm just saying."

Shen Qingqiu opened his mouth to argue—to defend himself, or possibly Liu Qingge's honor, or possibly to make it clear that *he*, at least, would never be caught with anything like that in his qiankun pouch—but the words dried up somewhere in his throat.

"Why does he care?" The question slipped out before Shen Qingqiu could stop it. "Whether I'm eating. Whether I'm sleeping. What does all that even *matter* to him?"

Shang Qinghua gave him a look that was somehow both exhausted and incredulous. "Cucumber-bro. *Seriously?*"

"What?"

"Nothing." Shang Qinghua shook his head, muttering something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like *oblivious* and *deserve each other* and *I need a vacation*. "Forget I said anything. I'm sure it's all about revenge. Very normal revenge-related inquiries about your dietary habits."

"It *is* about revenge," Shen Qingqiu said, and he was proud of how steady his voice came out. "He's making sure I'm healthy enough to suffer properly when he finally comes for me. It's classic villain behavior."

"That's—"

"Think about it." Shen Qingqiu was warming to his theory now, the familiar comfort of *analysis* settling over the raw panic underneath. "You don't torment someone who's already wasting away. Where's the satisfaction? No, you want your victim *healthy*. Alert. Fully capable of appreciating every moment of their impending destruction." He nodded to himself.

Shang Qinghua stared at him for a long moment. “Yeah. That's definitely it. Very normal revenge-based dietary surveillance. I can't believe I didn't see it," he said flatly.

"It's psychological warfare."

"Right."

"The long game."

"Uh huh."

"Gathering intelligence on my habits so he knows exactly when I'm most vulnerable. Learning my schedule so he can time his revenge for maximum impact. Finding out what I eat so he knows—" Shen Qingqiu's eyes widened. "So he knows what to *poison*."

"...what."

"It's obvious." Shen Qingqiu was nodding now, pieces clicking into place with the satisfying inevitability of a conspiracy theory that had fully consumed its host. "He's cataloging my preferences so he can taint something I'll actually consume. I *knew* I shouldn't have told Ming Fan about the osmanthus cakes."

"You think the demon emperor who conquered half the demon realm is going to assassinate you with *pastry*?"

"It's *exactly* the kind of poetic irony he'd appreciate! I used to give him osmanthus cakes as a reward. Now they become the instrument of my demise." Shen Qingqiu's voice had gone slightly feverish. "He probably has a whole speech planned."

Shang Qinghua's expression had shifted into something uncomfortably close to pity. "Shen-shixiong," he said slowly. "Has it ever occurred to you that maybe, *possibly*, the explanation isn't that complicated?"

"The simplest explanation is usually correct," Shen Qingqiu agreed. "And the simplest explanation is that he hates me and wants me to suffer."

Shang Qinghua stared at him for a long moment.

Then he dropped his face into his hands and made a sound that might have been a laugh or might have been a sob. It was hard to tell.

"Sure," he said, muffled. "Yeah. That's definitely it. Strategic pastry reconnaissance. Death by osmanthus cakes. Totally obvious. I can't believe I didn't see it."

"Are you mocking me?"

"I would never." Shang Qinghua lifted his head, and his expression had settled into something flat and tired. "I have to go. My king's going to freeze something important if I'm late, and I still have to figure out how to tell my son that you ate half a bowl of congee this morning and then forgot about the other half because you were too busy staring out the window looking tragic."

"I wasn't—" Shen Qingqiu stopped. He had, in fact, done exactly that. "Ming Fan told you about the *congee*?"

"Ming Fan tells me about everything. You should be proud—he's very dedicated. I've never had an asset submit reports with *endnotes* before." Shang Qinghua stood, brushing off his inside-out robes. "Honestly, I'm running out of chapters to pay him with. He's going to bankrupt me. Anyway, try to eat dinner. Actual dinner. With vegetables and everything. It'll make my life easier."

"I don't see how my eating habits affect your—"

"Because when you don't eat, I have to tell him you didn't eat, and then he gets this *look*—" Shang Qinghua shuddered. "Just eat, okay? For my blood pressure. Which is already through the roof."

He was gone before Shen Qingqiu could respond.

Very normal revenge-based dietary surveillance

Shen Qingqiu stared at the closed door.

Then he looked down at the tea still pooling across his desk, soaking into paperwork he didn't care about, dripping slowly onto the floor.

He should clean that up.

He didn't move.

The Western demon territories had surrendered at dawn.

Luo Binghe stood atop the ramparts of what had once been their capital fortress, watching the sun rise over a landscape painted in shades of blood and ash. The wind carried the scent of smoke and something sharper—fear, maybe, or the metallic tang of spent spiritual energy. His army sprawled below him like a dark tide, demons and conquered soldiers alike, all bearing his mark now. All his.

He should have felt something. Victory, perhaps. Satisfaction. Pride.

He felt tired.

Three years clawing his way out of the Abyss with Xin Mo screaming in his hands. And now, nearly a year of conquest while simultaneously infiltrating Huan Hua Palace—smiling at people he wanted to kill by day, tearing through demon territories by night. Portaling between realms so often that sometimes he forgot which mask he was supposed to be wearing.

The West had finally fallen. The East was buckling, their guerrilla tactics and fragmented warlord alliances crumbling under the weight of his advance. One, maybe two more months, and that campaign would be over too.

And then the demon realm would be his. Completely. Uncontestably.

Meng Mo claimed his talent for conquest was his demonic heritage. The blood of Tianlang-Jun, making itself known.

Luo Binghe thought it might just be rage with nowhere else to go.

"My lord."

He didn't turn. He recognized the voice—one of his generals, a bull demon who'd been clever enough to surrender early and prove his worth. "Speak."

"The Western delegation wishes to... negotiate terms of peace."

Now Luo Binghe did turn. The general took an involuntary step back at whatever he saw in his emperor's face.

"I wasn't aware there were terms to negotiate," Luo Binghe said pleasantly. "They surrendered. Unconditionally."

"Yes, my lord. But they wish to... formalize the relationship." The general swallowed. "They've sent. Um. Brides."

The word hung in the air like a dead thing.

"Brides," Luo Binghe repeated. His voice had gone very soft. Very dangerous.

"Twelve of them," the general continued, looking like he wanted to be anywhere else. "Daughters of their noble houses. As tribute, they said. To honor your new position as emperor and to—to formally establish the harem that—"

Xin Mo pulsed. The air around Luo Binghe shimmered with demonic energy, red and black and hungry.

"Where," Luo Binghe asked, each word clipped, "is this delegation now?"

The throne room had been cleared of everyone except Luo Binghe, his personal guard, and the twelve Western nobles who thought they could buy peace with women like currency.

They'd dressed the brides beautifully, he had to admit. Silks in every color, jewelry catching the light, faces painted to perfection. They stood in a line, eyes downcast, while their fathers and brothers preened and postured about the honor they were bestowing.

Luo Binghe sat on his throne and tried to remember the last time he'd felt this particular flavor of fury. It burned cold instead of hot, settling in his chest like ice.

"You misunderstand something fundamental," he said when the delegation's leader finally stopped talking. "About me. About my position. About what I want."

The leader—some puffed-up peacock of a demon with elaborate horns—smiled ingratiatingly. "Of course, Your Majesty. We understand that twelve may seem... insufficient, given your station. But these are merely the first, you see. More can be provided as—"

"I don't want twelve," Luo Binghe interrupted. "I don't want more. I don't want *any* of them."

Confused silence rippled through the delegation.

"Your Majesty," the peacock tried again, "surely you cannot mean to refuse—these are the finest daughters of our houses—"

"I'm sure they're lovely." His eyes hadn't left the man's face. "But I'm not interested."

"But... a harem is traditional! Expected! An emperor without a harem is—"

"Not interested," Luo Binghe repeated. "In harems. In multiple wives. In any of this." He stood, and the movement was enough to make half the delegation flinch. "Let me be extremely clear, since you seem to be having trouble understanding. There will be no harem. There will be no empress selected from—" He stopped. "There will be no empress. At all. Is that clear enough?"

The delegation exchanged nervous glances. "But Junshang, surely—"

"There is only one person," Luo Binghe said quietly, "who will ever hold that position."

The silence stretched. Someone in the back of the delegation shifted nervously.

"And *he*," Luo Binghe continued, voice going cold, "is not yours to offer. Not yours to select. Not a matter for this court to discuss at all." His hand rested on Xin Mo's hilt. "Am I understood?"

The peacock had gone pale. "Your Majesty, we meant no offense, but surely you can see—your position demands—the expectations of demon society—"

"Are you," Luo Binghe asked softly, "telling me what my position demands?"

The temperature in the room dropped. Xin Mo pulsed again, stronger this time, and Luo Binghe felt its hunger rising to meet his own fury. It would be so easy. So satisfying. To draw the blade and—

He did.

Xin Mo sang as it left the sheath, and the peacock who'd spoken didn't even have time to scream before he was in two pieces on the floor. The blood sprayed across the fine robes of the delegates beside him, hot and red and *satisfying* in a way that made something dark in Luo Binghe's chest purr with contentment.

More, Xin Mo whispered. *More more more—*

"The rest of them," Luo Binghe said, and his voice came out strange, layered with something that wasn't quite his own. "Execute them. The fathers, the brothers, the entire delegation."

Screaming erupted. The nobles fell to their knees, begging, pleading, offering anything if he'd just show mercy—

Luo Binghe cut down two more before he forced himself to stop. Forced Xin Mo back into something like compliance, though it fought him, greedy and unsatisfied. Three was enough. Three would have to be enough.

"But not the women," he continued, raising his voice to be heard over the chaos. "Send them home. With carriages and guards and enough gold that they'll never have to rely on their families again." His eyes swept the line of terrified brides, some of whom were now splattered with the blood of their relatives. "And make sure every demon in the realm knows why they're being sent back. Make sure everyone understands that I will not be taking a harem. Ever."

His general bowed, already moving to carry out the orders. The surviving nobles were still screaming as they were dragged away.

Luo Binghe sat back down on his throne and tried to feel satisfied.

He didn't.

Xin Mo thrummed against his palm, restless. Three wasn't enough. It was never enough. The sword wanted *more*—more blood, more conquest, more, *more*, ***more***—

It was never enough.

Nothing ever was.

Will I be? The thought surfaced before he could stop it. *Will I ever be enough to make him forget?*

Xin Mo pulsed, hungry and impatient, and Luo Binghe didn't have an answer.

He portaled back to Huan Hua that evening, blood still drying under his fingernails.

There hadn't been time to bathe properly—there was never time anymore—so he'd scrubbed his hands raw in a stream and changed into clean robes before stepping through the rift. The transition was jarring, as always. One moment standing in a conquered throne room that reeked of fear and death; the next, walking through immaculate gardens where disciples bowed respectfully as he passed.

"Luo-shixiong!"

He fixed his expression into something pleasant before turning. The Little Palace Mistress was hurrying toward him, silk robes fluttering, face bright with the kind of excitement that made his skin crawl.

"Father wishes to see you," she said breathlessly, falling into step beside him. Too close. She was always too close. "He says he needs to talk to you about something very important!"

Luo Binghe smiled. It felt like wearing a mask made of broken glass. "Of course. Lead the way."

The Palace Master's office was exactly as ostentatious as always. Scrolls everywhere, shelves lined with precious artifacts, a desk made of wood so rare it probably cost more than a small village.

The old man himself sat behind the desk, looking pleased about something. That made Luo Binghe immediately wary.

"Xiao Luo," the Palace Master said warmly. "Come in, come in. Sit."

Luo Binghe sat. Kept his posture relaxed. Kept smiling.

"I've been thinking," the old man continued, steepling his fingers. "About your future. About our sect's future." His eyes gleamed. "You've been with us for so long now. You've proven yourself invaluable—your cultivation, your battle prowess, your... dedication."

Dedication. As if Luo Binghe hadn't been sneaking out every night to conquer demon territories while the Palace Master thought he was in secluded cultivation.

"You honor me, Palace Master."

"I don't say this lightly." The old man leaned forward. "I believe it's time we formalized your position. Made you more than just a guest disciple." A pause, heavy with meaning. "Made you family."

There it was.

"Palace Master—"

"My daughter is quite taken with you," the old man continued, steamrolling over Luo Binghe's attempted interruption. "And I must say, I approve. A union between you would

be... beneficial. For everyone."

Luo Binghe's smile didn't waver. His hands didn't clench. But something cold settled in his chest.

"I'm honored by your consideration," he said carefully. "But I'm not certain I'm ready for such a commitment. My cultivation requires—"

"Of course, of course. No rush." The Palace Master waved a hand magnanimously. "But do think about it. A man of your talents needs a strong foundation. Allies. Support." His expression softened into something meant to look fatherly. "I worry about you, Luo-shidi. You carry so much weight on your shoulders. Anyone can see it."

Luo Binghe said nothing.

"Whatever burdens you bear—whatever holds you back from fully embracing your future here—" The old man spread his hands, the gesture almost warm. Almost kind. "You can trust me, Xiao Luo. Huan Hua can be a haven for you. *I* can be a haven."

He let that settle. Let the strange weight of it fill the space between them.

Something in Luo Binghe's stomach turned.

"You've been alone for so long, haven't you?" The Palace Master's voice had gone soft. Intimate. He reached out and patted Luo Binghe's knee, letting his hand rest there a beat too long. "I can see it in you. That hunger. That *need*."

Bile rose in Luo Binghe's throat. Xin Mo pulsed at his hip, hungry and eager, and it took everything he had not to let it slip its leash. Not yet. *Not yet.* The demon realm wasn't secure. The plan wasn't complete. He could not afford to—

He forced his demon mark to stay hidden. Forced his claws to stay retracted. Forced himself to sit there and *smile*.

“And if there's someone from your past causing you difficulty... someone keeping you tethered to old loyalties, old pain..." The old man leaned forward, just slightly. Just enough that Luo Binghe had to lock every muscle in his body to keep from flinching back. "I could help with that. Remove the obstacle, so to speak. Quietly. Cleanly. You'd never have to think about them again."

Shizun.

He was talking about Shizun.

Luo Binghe's vision went white at the edges. Every part of him screamed to lunge across this table and tear this man apart piece by piece, slowly, *slowly*, make him regret ever even *thinking*—

"I'm not sure what you mean, Palace Master," Luo Binghe said. His voice came out steady. Pleasant. Perfectly controlled.

It was perhaps his greatest performance to date.

"No?" The old man leaned back, smile still fixed in place. "Well. If you ever wish to confide in me, my door is always open." He steepled his fingers, watching Luo Binghe with that sharp, acquisitive gaze. "Think about my daughter, Xiao Luo. Think about what Huan Hua can offer you." A pause, deliberate and heavy. "And think about whether whatever—or *whoever*—is holding you back is truly worth the cost."

Luo Binghe bowed. The motion was flawless. Graceful. Perfectly respectful.

He was three corridors away before he let himself breathe.

Soon, he promised himself. Soon this place would burn. Soon this man would learn exactly how much his threats were worth. Soon—

But not yet.

Shizun first. Always.

Everything else could wait.

Later—after the political maneuvering and the false smiles and one more secret portal to the Eastern front—Luo Binghe stood alone on a balcony at Huan Hua, watching the stars.

Xin Mo pulsed against his back. Hungry. Restless. He'd fed it twice today—once during the executions, once during the skirmish.

It still wasn't enough.

It was never enough.

He was so tired. Bone-deep exhausted in a way that sleep couldn't touch. Sometimes he finished a battle and couldn't remember parts of it. Just blackness where memories should be, and Xin Mo humming contentedly when he came back to himself.

Just a little longer, he told himself. Then the entire demon realm would be completely his. Then he could stop splitting himself between worlds, stop maintaining this exhausting facade, stop—

Stop what?

What came after?

Shang Qinghua's latest report drifted through his mind. *He's lost weight. Barely leaves his house. He stared at the same cup of cold tea for two hours yesterday without drinking it. He looks like*—A pause, audible even in memory—*like he's mourning someone, Junshang. Not that this servant knows who.*

Good, Luo Binghe thought viciously. *Let him mourn. Let him suffer.*

But beneath the viciousness, something else stirred. Something small and desperate and pathetic.

Mourning who?

Was it—could it possibly be—

Don't, he told himself sharply. *Don't hope. You know who he's mourning. You've seen the paintings.*

But what if it wasn't Tianlang-Jun? What if Shizun was sitting in that bamboo house, staring at cold tea, thinking about *Binghe*? Missing *Binghe*?

The thought tasted like ash. Like hope. Like poison.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember Shizun's voice. The weight of his hand in Binghe's hair. The rare smile that made something warm unfurl in his chest.

Just a little longer. Until the East falls. Until I take Huan Hua. Until I can stand before him as Emperor with uncontested power.

Xin Mo pulsed. Impatient.

Luo Binghe opened his eyes.

Somewhere beyond these mountains was Cang Qiong. Qing Jing Peak. A bamboo house where Shizun sat alone, staring out windows, forgetting to eat.

Just a little longer. He told himself again as he turned from the balcony and went to find something else to kill. Xin Mo needed feeding, and sleep wasn't coming anyway.

It never did.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ 🤝 LBH
Constructing elaborate incorrect theories

SQH's report: he looks like he's mourning someone
LBH's brain: BUT WHO. WHO IS HE MOURNING? IS IT ME??? IT'S PROBABLY NOT ME.

Chapter 10: A Matter of Narrative Integrity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shang Qinghua burst into Luo Binghe's war room without knocking, and every demon present turned to stare menacingly at his abrupt entrance.

One them started to rise, clearly intending to remove this interruption permanently. His claws were already extending when Mobei-Jun moved—a blur of cold air and killing intent that put him between the general and the gasping peak lord before anyone could blink.

"Sit. Down." Mobei-Jun's voice could have frozen lava.

The general sat.

But Luo Binghe was looking at Shang Qinghua's face now. Pale, sweating, eyes wild with panic. This wasn't the spy's usual cowardice. This was genuine terror.

"Out," Luo Binghe said. His voice cut through the room like a blade. "Everyone out. Now."

They went. Even Mobei-Jun, though he lingered at the door, ice-blue eyes fixed on his human with an intensity that bordered on concern. Shang Qinghua gave him a tiny, exhausted nod—*I'm fine, go*—and something in Mobei-Jun's jaw tightened before he stepped out and pulled the door closed behind him.

When they were alone, Shang Qinghua collapsed against the nearest wall, gasping for breath.

"My lord—" he wheezed. "I came as—as fast as I could—"

"Speak," Luo Binghe commanded. Something cold was spreading through his chest. Something that tasted like dread.

"Shen Qingqiu," Shang Qinghua managed. "He's been—they've taken him—the water prison—"

The world went very still.

Then Xin Mo screamed.

Malevolent energy erupted from the sword without Luo Binghe consciously drawing upon it, black and red energy pouring off the blade in waves. The air crackled with demonic power. Hairline cracks spider-webbed across the stone walls.

"What," Luo Binghe said, and his voice came from somewhere deep and dark and absolutely furious, "did you just say."

Shang Qinghua had pressed himself flat against the wall, eyes wide. "Huan Hua—they arrested him—they found evidence—connection to demons—they've imprisoned him in their water dungeon pending trial—"

Luo Binghe moved. One moment he was across the room, the next he had Shang Qinghua by the front of his robes, lifting him off the ground. "When."

"Two days ago," Shang Qinghua gasped. "I only just found out, I swear—there were rumors, but I had to confirm—"

Two days.

Shizun had been in that prison for two days.

Two days.

Luo Binghe dropped Shang Qinghua, who hit the floor with a yelp.

"My lord, wait—!" Shang Qinghua scrambled backward on his hands, putting distance between himself and the demonic energy crackling off Luo Binghe in waves.

"Give me one reason." Luo Binghe's voice didn't sound like his own. It sounded like Xin Mo. Like the Abyss. "One reason I shouldn't portal there right now and tear that palace apart stone by stone."

"Because you'll lose everything you built!" Shang Qinghua's voice cracked. "If the Demon Emperor shows up and slaughters a major sect, every cultivator in the world unites against you. You'll be fighting humans and the Eastern territories at the same time—and the West just surrendered, they're looking for any excuse to rebel. Everything you've been working toward—the empire, Huan Hua, all of it—gone!"

Xin Mo pulsed in disagreement. It wanted blood. Wanted war. Wanted to carve through Huan Hua Palace until the stones ran red.

But underneath the sword's hunger, Luo Binghe's own tactical mind was churning. Shang Qinghua was right. If he attacked Huan Hua now, the cultivation world would unite against him. The West would see weakness and rise up. The East would redouble their resistance. He'd be fighting a war on all fronts—demons who smelled blood in the water, humans who feared him, everyone.

And Huan Hua would slip through his fingers. The foothold he'd spent so long building. The control he'd been so close to securing.

All of it. Everything he'd built. Everything he'd sacrificed sleep and sanity and pieces of himself to create.

He'd built it for Shen Qingqui. All of it. An empire worthy of laying at his Shizun’s feet. Power enough to protect him from anything. And now—

"This wasn't supposed to happen," Luo Binghe said. The words came out harsh, almost desperate. "I had a plan. This wasn't—"

He stopped. Breathed.

Think. Think like an emperor, not a beast.

The rage didn't fade. But it froze over, crystallizing into something sharper. More dangerous.

"I need to go there," Luo Binghe said. "Not with an army. Alone. I still have access to the palace. The Old Palace Master still thinks I'm his potential son-in-law."

"You're going to negotiate?" Mobei-Jun's voice came from the doorway. He'd come back in, silent as a shadow.

"No," Luo Binghe said. Xin Mo pulsed in his hand. "I'm going to take control. The Old Palace Master has been useful until now. But he made a mistake. A critical one."

"What mistake?" Shang Qinghua asked.

Luo Binghe's smile was razor-sharp and utterly empty. "He touched what's mine."

The Old Palace Master's private quarters were guarded, but not against someone with Luo Binghe's clearances. He walked through the outer offices unchallenged, nodding at disciples who bowed respectfully. Just another visit from the promising young talent.

He carried a tea tray. Fine porcelain, expensive leaves. The kind of thing you brought when visiting a respected elder.

He waited until nightfall. Until the old man had retired to his chambers, dismissed his servants, and was alone with his scrolls.

Then Luo Binghe let himself in.

The Palace Master looked up, startled but not alarmed. "Xiao Luo! This is unexpected. What's this?"

"I thought you might enjoy some tea," Luo Binghe said pleasantly. He set the tray down on the desk. "A rare blend from the western territories. I acquired it during my travels."

"How thoughtful!" The old man looked genuinely pleased. "Please, sit. We can discuss your future with the sect."

Luo Binghe poured tea for both of them, movements practiced and graceful. He'd spent enough time in refined company to know the rituals. "I've been considering your offer, Palace Master."

"Excellent!" The old man picked up his cup, inhaling the fragrant steam. "I knew you'd see reason. A man of your talents needs a strong foundation, and Huan Hua can provide—"

He drank.

Luo Binghe waited, his own cup untouched. Made pleasant conversation about cultivation techniques, about the latest developments in the demon territories, about anything and nothing.

After ten minutes, he saw the old man's eyes begin to glaze slightly.

"Shen Qingqiu," Luo Binghe said. "You've imprisoned him."

"Ah. Yes, unfortunate business, that. Evidence came to light connecting him to demonic forces." He set down his tea cup. "I know you had some connection to Cang Qiong, but surely you can see—"

"Can I?" Luo Binghe questioned incredulously

"Well, the evidence is quite damning," the Palace Master continued. "Sower demons were found on the border with detailed intelligence, meeting records, even love letters. It seems Shen Qingqiu has been in collusion with demons for years."

“Is the evidence really that certain?”

“No, it's all very obviously fabricated, ” The Palace Master was surprised at his own answer but Binge pressed on

“So then, why did you imprison my Shizun?”

The words were dragged from the Palace Master's mouth before he could stop them. "Because I saw—I saw how you looked at him. Like—like she looked at that demon. And I couldn't—" His face contorted. "I can't lose you too. Not when you're—"

"When I'm what," Luo Binghe prompted.

"When you're all I have left of her!" The words exploded out.

"You mean Su Xiyan?" Luo Binghe said softly. "My mother."

"Yes." The Palace Master's hands clenched. "She was supposed to seduce him. Gather information. Instead, she—" His voice cracked. "She fell in love. With a demon. He defiled her and left her pregnant! The poison—" He stopped, took a shaky breath. "If she'd just agreed to end the pregnancy, she would have lived. But she refused. She chose him over us. Over me."

The world tilted slightly.

Luo Binghe heard his own voice, distant and strange: "She chose the child over her own life."

"She chose a *demon's* child over her own life," the old man spat. "For what? For some monster that should never have existed. That’s why I won't—I *won't* let that Peak Lord

seduce you away like—"

"Like what?" Luo Binghe's voice had gone very quiet. Very dangerous.

"Like that monster seduced my Su Xiyan!" The Palace Master was fighting the truth serum's effects now, but losing. "The way he looked at you at the Conference—the inappropriate attachment—everyone could see it! He had his hooks in you from the moment you arrived at Cang Qiong, grooming you, making you dependent on him—"

"How dare you?" Luo Binghe said. His voice cracked like a whip.

But the old man couldn't stop. The truth serum had him now, dragging out every poisonous thought. "He's just like that demon. Corrupting, destroying, stealing away everything good and pure. Tianlang-Jun ruined my Su Xiyan, and now Shen Qingqiu is trying to ruin you, and I won't—I won't let him—"

"You're wrong," Luo Binghe said. Each word came out precise. Controlled. "Shizun never—he treated me with nothing but appropriate care. Whatever I felt, whatever I wanted—that was my choice. My desire. Not his."

The Palace Master choked on nothing and his eyes widened. "What did you—"

"You drank truth serum," Luo Binghe said calmly. "Among other things. Feel it yet?"

The old man's hand flew to his throat. His face had gone gray. "What—what have you done—"

"Heavenly demon blood mites," Luo Binghe said. He stood, looking down at the man who'd tried to use him as a replacement for his lost disciple. "They're in your bloodstream now. Feeding on your spiritual energy. Causing exquisite pain." He tilted his head. "But they won't kill you. That would be too merciful."

The Palace Master tried to speak. Nothing came out but a strangled gasp. The blood mites were constricting his throat now, making breathing difficult.

"Here's what's going to happen," Luo Binghe said. "You're going to tell your guards you're entering seclusion. No visitors. No interruptions. You're going to stay in these quarters. And you're going to tell them that you're putting me in charge of everything in your absence."

He moved toward the door, then paused. "Oh, and Palace Master? There's no antidote. Those blood mites will live in you forever. They'll do exactly as I command for the rest of your life. Resist my orders, and they'll make you wish for death."

He smiled. It was not a pleasant expression.

"But follow my orders, and they'll merely be... uncomfortable. A small price to pay for your crimes, don't you think?"

The door opened and closed, leaving the old man alone with his pain and his regrets and the knowledge that he'd made an enemy of the wrong person.

Luo Binghe's hands were shaking when he reached the corridor outside.

He pressed his back against the wall, breathing hard, trying to center himself. By morning, Huan Hua would be his in all but name. But he couldn't think about that right now.

Inappropriate attachment. Grooming. Seduction.

The words made him feel sick. Not because they were true—they weren't, he *knew* they weren't—but because the old man had twisted something precious into something sordid. Had looked at the most important relationship in Luo Binghe's life and seen only corruption.

Shizun had never looked at him that way. Had never treated him as anything other than a student. Any desire, any longing, any desperate hunger for more—that had all been Binghe's. Only Binghe's.

I'm not going to let them make you into a monster, he thought fiercely. *Not when you're the only person who ever treated me like I was worth something.*

He pushed off the wall and started walking. He needed to get to the water prison. Needed to see Shizun. Needed—

Xin Mo hummed against his back, satisfied with the evening's violence but already hungry for more. The sword's presence pressed against his mind, dark and demanding, and Luo Binghe's steps slowed.

If Luo Binghe walked into that prison with Xin Mo on his back, demonic energy crackling around him, what would Shizun see?

Not his former disciple. Not the boy who had loved him desperately and silently for years.

He'd see *him*. Tianlang-Jun. The demon lord Shizun had spent years immortalizing in paint and clay. The man whose face Luo Binghe apparently shared—the same demon mark, the same power, the same cursed sword.

Would Shizun's breath catch? Would his eyes go soft with memory? Would he look at Luo Binghe and see only a ghost of someone he'd actually wanted?

The thought was unbearable.

He detoured to his guest quarters. The room was sparse—he'd never bothered to personalize it, knowing his time here was temporary—but it had a wardrobe with a lock. He unstrapped Xin Mo from his back, and the sword's scream of protest echoed through his skull.

Soon, he promised it. *Just—not now. Not for this.*

He couldn't maintain glamours with Xin Mo actively fighting him. Couldn't risk the sword's hunger bleeding through at the worst possible moment. Couldn't risk Shizun looking at him and seeing his father's shadow.

He locked the sword away. The silence in his head was almost painful after months of the blade's constant whispers.

But it was worth it.

He didn't want Shizun's first sight of him in four years to include the demon sword that had belonged to the man Shizun had apparently loved. He didn't want to see recognition flicker in those green eyes—recognition and disappointment, because Luo Binghe was just a pale imitation of someone Shizun had lost.

He checked his reflection in the polished bronze mirror. He looked almost human. Almost like the disciple Shizun remembered.

Almost.

It would have to be enough.

He left the room and headed for the water prison, heart pounding against his ribs.

He was almost there.

He'd finally see Shizun again.

The thought made something in his chest clench painfully tight—hope and terror and longing all tangled together until he couldn't tell where one ended and the others began.

He wasn't ready.

He went anyway.

The stone platform was cold.

That was Shen Qingqiu's first coherent thought, and his constant thought through every moment after. Cold. Bone-deep, seeping, inescapable cold—and the 108 Immortal-Binding Cables wrapped around his body weren't helping.

The cables were thin, like red threads that might snap under pressure. They did not snap. They wound around his limbs, his torso, his neck, pressing against his spiritual veins until his entire meridian system felt strangled. His qi couldn't circulate. He was weaker than a mortal. Hollowed out..

This is fine, he told himself, with the kind of hysterical humor that only came from truly terrible situations.

The arrest had been absurd. Huan Hua Palace disciples showing up at Qing Jing Peak with official sect documents and grim expressions, claiming that sower demons had been caught carrying letters that implicated Shen Qingqiu in "consorting with demonic forces." Letters he'd never written. Meetings he'd never attended. A conspiracy so obviously fabricated that Shen Qingqiu had almost laughed in their faces.

He hadn't laughed. He'd been too busy being dragged away in chains while his disciples watched in horror.

Someone went to a lot of trouble to frame me, he thought. *The question is who. And why now?*

The obvious answer was Luo Binghe. The protagonist, finally making his move. Except—

According to Shang Qinghua's reports, Binghe had been busy conquering the demon realm. Building an empire. Consolidating power exactly as the novel dictated. All very protagonist behavior, all very on-schedule.

None of it involved hunting down his former teacher. Yet.

Maybe I'm just not a priority, Shen Qingqiu had thought, and the idea landed somewhere uncomfortable in his chest. *Maybe he has bigger things to worry about than revenge on one scum villain.*

That thought should have been a relief during his days of endless anxiety. If Luo Binghe had decided Shen Qingqiu wasn't worth his time, that meant no human stick arc. No years of torture.

He'd been ridiculous to think Luo Binghe might have forgotten about him. And now…here he was. Exactly where the blackened protagonist wanted him.

The door to the cell scraped open.

Shen Qingqiu's head jerked toward the sound. He blinked against the sudden torchlight and tried to focus on the figure making its way down the stone path.

Young. Male. Huan Hua robes. The Palace Master's head disciple—Gongyi Xiao, if Shen Qingqiu remembered correctly.

Gongyi Xiao stepped onto the platform carefully, carrying a water skin. His face was blank, but something uncomfortable flickered in his eyes.

"Shen-fengzhu. I've brought water."

"How generous." Shen Qingqiu's voice came out raspy. "Does Huan Hua Palace always treat its prisoners so well?"

Gongyi Xiao's jaw tightened. "The Palace Master ordered you kept alive. For your trial." He knelt beside Shen Qingqiu. "May I?"

Pride said refuse. Practicality won. "Fine."

Gongyi Xiao brought the water skin to his lips with surprising gentleness. Shen Qingqiu drank carefully, watching the disciple's face.

"This isn't right," Gongyi Xiao said quietly. "What they're doing to you. The evidence is clearly fabricated. Anyone with eyes can see that."

"Then help me. Tell your Palace Master—"

"My Palace Master is the one who ordered this." Gongyi Xiao pulled the water skin back. "He believes you're a threat. To the sect. To—" He stopped.

"To what?"

"To Luo Binghe." Gongyi Xiao's eyes met his. "The Palace Master thinks you have some hold over him. Some inappropriate attachment from his time at Cang Qiong."

Luo Binghe.

The name crashed through Shen Qingqiu like a wave.

"I don't understand," he said. "What does this have to do with—"

"Luo-shidi is here. He's been at Huan Hua for the last year, training under the Palace Master."

The world tilted.

All those reports from Shang Qinghua about the demon realm conquest, and the whole time, Binghe had also been *here*. Building his human connections too. Smart. Strategic.

Of course. Of course he's clever. Of course he's brilliant. Of course he's… perfect. Shen Qingqiu's chest tightened for reasons he absolutely refused to name. Tactical admiration. Purely analytical.

"There's talk of a marriage," Gongyi Xiao continued. "Between him and the Palace Master's daughter."

Marriage.

The Palace Master's daughter.

Something inside him cracked. His bound hands tried to clench.

So he's been waiting. Saving himself. For her. For the Little Palace Mistress, that simpering, spoiled—

He caught himself, startled by the sharp, ugly sense of betrayal flaring in his chest. Why would he feel so—

Stop. Stop. This is purely academic. Scholarly, even.

The protagonist wasn't supposed to choose *like that*. That was all this is. Literary criticism.

Wife #247's only character trait had been "allergic to shellfish" and she STILL had more depth than the Little Palace Mistress. That comparison was already unfair—to the shellfish

allergy.

It made sense. He was angry because this was objectively a terrible narrative choice.

"You look pale," Gongyi Xiao said. "Are you—"

"I'm fine. Just cold. And bound. And imprisoned on fabricated charges. But fine."

The door scraped open again.

The young woman who entered was beautiful in the way privileged daughters always were: expensive robes, ornate hair, the confidence of someone who'd never been told no. Shen Qingqiu recognized her immediately from the novel's descriptions.

Speak of the devil.

Gongyi Xiao straightened. "Lian-shijie, I really don't think—"

"You don't think what?" she said sweetly. "That I should visit the prisoner who's been corrupting my future husband's mind?"

Future husband. So it wasn't just rumors.

Good, Shen Qingqiu told himself. *This was exactly how the plot was supposed to go.*

So why did it feel like something was splintering behind his ribs, sharp and slow, like a crack spreading through bone?

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said carefully, because anything less careful might come out wrong..

“Don’t you?” She stepped closer, looking him over with mild curiosity, the way one might examine an insect pinned to a board.

She pulled out a whip.

Not a spiritual implement. Not a ceremonial weapon. A barbed iron whip—segmented metal studded with cruel little hooks, like rows of hungry teeth.

What the fuck, Shen Qingqiu thought. Why is a teenage girl wielding medieval torture equipment?

Airplane, he added distantly, *your character design is so atrocious.*

"Lian-shijie—" Gongyi Xiao started forward. "You can't—"

“Luo-shidi has been distracted,” she said lightly.

She paused, as if reconsidering. Her lips curved. “Or perhaps I should say… *A-Luo*.”

Shen Qingqiu’s head snapped up before he could stop himself.

Excuse you?

That name landed wrong—too soft, too familiar, dropped into the scene like a line that hadn't been earned. She wasn't Yingying. She hadn't spent years trailing after him, hadn't worried over him, hadn't—

He cut the thought off hard.

This was clearly a failure of narrative pacing. Nicknames like that required groundwork. Emotional buildup. Consistency. You didn't just hand them out to random side characters and expect it to feel convincing.

"A-Luo doesn't like being distracted," she continued, watching his reaction with open interest. "Father says it's because you have some hold over him."

Her smile sharpened. "I've come to make sure you understand your place. You need to understand that Luo-shidi belongs to Huan Hua now. To our family."

Belongs to you?!

Something hot and ugly twisted in Shen Qingqiu's chest, tight enough to steal his breath. Absolutely not. Ridiculous. From a purely analytical standpoint, this was indefensible.

She wasn't even top fifty material. Not even in the top *one hundred*. In three million words of harem content, Airplane had written wives with allergies, wives with hobbies, wives with tragic backstories—

And all you got was "spoiled daughter with a whip." That's it. That was the sum total of your narrative value.

This was a complaint about writing quality. About character construction. About the protagonist being saddled with a subpar romantic option.

That was all.

The whip came cracking down.

The cables restricted his spiritual power, but his physical reflexes remained. Shen Qingqiu threw himself sideways. The whip smashed into stone where he'd been kneeling, cracking the jade platform.

He landed hard on one knee. Pain shot through his shoulder. But he was unwhipped. For now.

"You *dare* to dodge?"

The second strike came faster. Shen Qingqiu rolled, the cables biting into his wrists as they strained. The whip's barbs caught his robes instead of flesh—fabric tearing with a sound like silk ripped clean in half.

The third strike clipped his shoulder. Fire exploded across his skin as the barbs dragged through flesh, leaving heat and agony in their wake. Blood welled up, bright and obscene against pale skin.

"Lian-shijie, this is *enough*—" Gongyi Xiao moved between them.

"It's enough when I say it's enough!" She raised the whip again.

Sadistic psycho with a whip, Shen Qingqiu thought hazily. *One personality trait. Truly inspired character work, Airplane.*

"Luo-shidi is here," Gongyi Xiao blurted. "He arrived an hour ago. If you're not there when his audience with your father concludes—"

She paused, calculating.

"You're right. I should go tell him how I've properly punished this disgrace."

She left. The cave grew darker.

This was fine. This was manageable. This was not going to become emotionally relevant.

Gongyi Xiao pulled supplies from his robes. "Let me tend to your wounds. The barbs can cause infection."

Shen Qingqiu wanted to refuse. But his shoulder was screaming, and the cables made it impossible to treat himself.

"Fine. Alright."

Gongyi Xiao worked quickly, his hands gentle as he cleaned the wound and applied salve. Clinical. Professional.

"The wound isn't deep," Gongyi Xiao said, reaching for bandaging cloth. "Hold still—"

Footsteps echoed down the stone path. Fast. Purposeful.

The torchlight caught him first: tall, broad-shouldered, moving with predatory grace. Dark robes. Hair longer than Shen Qingqiu remembered.

What was important was the look in Luo Binghe's eyes when he saw them.

Chapter End Notes

GYX: Rumors that he’s getting married
SQQ: OUTRAGED. THIS IS ANALYSIS. NOT JEALOUSY.
LPM: My A-Luo

SQQ: SO ANGRY. MUST BE LITERARY INCONSISTENCY.
LPM: He belongs to Huan Hua now
SQQ: WHAT. ABSURD. DEFINITELY NOT JEALOUS. PURELY TEXTUAL CRITIQUE.

😂😂😂 You all are killing me with these comments! Seeing everyone have as much fun reading this as I did writing it honestly makes my day. Thank you to everyone who left kudos, commented, or bookmarked! Love you all!!!

Chapter 11: The Rescue

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu finally reunite. It goes about as well as you'd expect.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The water prison's door was open when he arrived.

Luo Binghe's heart stopped.

He'd spent the last hour dealing with the Old Palace Master—neutralizing the threat, making very clear what happened to people who touched what belonged to him. His hands still trembled with the aftermath of violence, with the anticipation of finally, *finally* seeing Shizun again.

But nothing could have prepared him for this.

Through the doorway—

Gongyi Xiao. Crouched beside Shen Qingqiu on the white jade platform, hands gentle as he tended to wounds. *Fresh* wounds. The whip marks across pale skin made something ancient and hungry roar in Luo Binghe's chest.

Shen Qingqiu's robes were torn—white silk shredded, revealing more of Shizun than Binghe had seen since—

The Skinner demon.

The memory slammed into him like a physical blow. Shizun’s skin was bared by the creature's cruel work. Binghe had been fifteen and terrified and so desperately in love he thought he might die from it. He had tried not to look. Had failed. Had spent weeks afterward pushing down the memory of pale shoulders and the graceful arch of Shizun's spine, telling himself the strange ache in his chest was just residual fear.

He'd been young enough to believe that.

Now here it was again—Shizun vulnerable, Shizun exposed, Shizun *suffering*—and Luo Binghe was no longer fifteen. Was no longer powerless. Was no longer *good*.

Spiritual suppression cables wound around Shizun's body like a lover's embrace turned cruel—wrapped tight around slender wrists, circling that narrow waist, pressing into the soft skin

of his throat. Red as silk ribbons. Red as blood. They held him kneeling on the jade platform, spine curved forward with the strain of the position, and Binghe's mouth went dry even as his vision went red.

And Gongyi Xiao was *touching him*.

Mine, something possessive snarled in the hollow of his chest. *He's MINE and someone is—*

The strange thing was how *quiet* his mind had gone.

Xin Mo was locked in his quarters. He had left it deliberately, hadn't wanted Shizun's first sight of him to include the demon sword that would remind him of Tianlang-Jun. But he realized now, standing in this doorway with murder singing through his veins, that it was the first time in months he'd felt truly *clear*. The sword's constant whispers, its endless hunger bleeding into his thoughts—all of it had gone silent the moment he'd locked it away.

If he'd brought Xin Mo, Gongyi Xiao would already be dead. The sword would have demanded it, and Binghe wouldn't have had the clarity to refuse. Would have painted the walls with the disciple's blood before his rational mind could intervene.

Instead, he could *think*. Could see, through the red haze of possessive fury, that the man had medicine on his fingers. Salve. Bandages. Could understand, in some distant corner of his mind, that Gongyi Xiao had been *helping*.

It didn't make him want to break every bone in those hands any less.

But he didn't have to.

"Get out."

Both men's heads whipped around.

Gongyi Xiao scrambled to his feet, eyes wide. "Luo-shidi, I was just—she whipped him, the Little Palace Mistress—I tried to stop her as soon as I could but—"

"I said." Luo Binghe's voice dropped to something dangerous. His hands were steady now—steadier than they'd been in months. The control felt unfamiliar. Precious. "Get. *Out.*"

Gongyi Xiao took one look at his face and fled.

Smart, Binghe thought distantly. *If he'd hesitated another moment, I might have changed my mind.*

He stood in the doorway for a long breath, two, cataloguing the strange sensation of being fully himself for the first time since he'd pulled Xin Mo from that corpse in the Abyss. No whispers urging him toward violence. No hunger bleeding into his own until he couldn't tell where he ended and the sword began.

Just him. Just his fury, his devotion, his desperate need—all of it *his*.

He crossed the cell in quick, long strides and finally—*finally*—looked.

Oh.

Oh.

Up close, Shizun looked—

Binghe's mind went blank. White. Static.

Shizun looked like a painting. Like a drowned immortal. Like every dream Binghe had tortured himself with in the Abyss made manifest in the terrible, unbearable reality of *now*.

Pale as moonlight on winter snow. Lips blue from cold, parted slightly, breath coming in shallow gasps that made his chest rise and fall beneath the ruined silk. His hair had come loose from its crown—*Shizun's hair*—spilling across the jade platform like ink on rice paper, like calligraphy Binghe wanted to trace with his fingers and his mouth and his entire desperate heart.

The whip marks were livid against that porcelain skin, each one a crime Luo Binghe would repay a thousandfold. But worse than the wounds was the *vulnerability*—the cables pressing into the soft curve of Shizun's waist, the pale column of his throat exposed and trembling, the way the torn robes gaped to reveal the delicate architecture of his collarbones.

Binghe had spent years memorizing a face in paint and clay, had built shrines to a figure he believed was his rival—the man who held Shizun's heart. Had studied every angle of that face, searching for weaknesses, for flaws, for some reason Shizun might turn away from *him* and toward Binghe instead.

He had never dared turn that obsessive attention to Shizun himself. Had only stolen glances, hoarded moments, let his gaze linger when he thought no one would notice.

Nothing could have prepared him for the reality of *looking*. For the sharp cut of those cheekbones. For the impossible green of those eyes. For the way Shizun looked in the low torchlight, all shadows and suffering, more beautiful than anything Binghe had ever seen and more broken than he could bear.

His hands came up to frame Shen Qingqiu's face, touch feather-light despite everything roaring inside him. Despite the fact that he wanted to—wanted to press closer, wanted to wrap himself around Shizun like armor, wanted to crawl inside that graceful body and never leave.

"Shizun," he breathed. Broken. Devastated.

Something in Binghe's chest cracked open. Four years. Four years of dreaming about this face, of waking in the dark with Shizun's name on his lips, of promising himself *when I get out, when I find him, when—*

And now Shizun was *here*. Bound. Injured. Helpless. No sect leaders to interfere. No martial siblings to stand between them. No one to stop Binghe from—

He pushed the thought away before it could finish forming.

"What did they do to you," Luo Binghe said. It wasn't a question. His eyes were cataloguing everything—the whip marks, the cables, the bruises blooming like dark flowers across skin that should never know anything but gentleness.

Beneath his palms, Shizun was trembling. Small, constant shivers that could have been cold or fear or both—Binghe felt each one like a blade sliding between his ribs.

"Don't." Shen Qingqiu's voice came out harsh. Defensive. "Don't pretend you care. Just—do whatever you came here to do and—"

"Look at me." His hands tightened on Shen Qingqiu's face. "Shizun. *Look at me.*"

See me, he wanted to beg. *See me, not him, not the demon mark, not whatever ghost you're looking for when your eyes slide past me—just once, just this once, SEE ME—*

Those green eyes met his.

Binghe had dreamed of this. Had spent endless nights in the dark imagining what it would feel like to have Shizun's gaze on him again. In some dreams, Shizun looked at him with horror—which was fair, which was *deserved*, because Binghe had become something monstrous in that pit. In others, rarer and more precious, Shizun looked at him the way he'd looked at those paintings. Soft. Tender. *Wanting*.

He had never dreamed of this.

Wariness. Fear. The brittle, resigned terror of a man who had already accepted his death and was simply waiting for the blow to fall.

He thinks I'm here to hurt him.

The realization didn't twist in Binghe's chest. It *shattered* something. Some last fragile hope he hadn't known he was still carrying—that Shizun might be glad to see him, that the years apart might have softened whatever had made his teacher push him into that rift.

Shizun looked at him like he was the monster that haunted children's nightmares. And maybe he was. But not for *him*. Never for him.

"I should have come sooner," Luo Binghe said. His voice came out wrong—scraped raw, too honest, nothing like the controlled tone he'd perfected in the Abyss. "I was trying to do this the right way. The smart way. Secure Huan Hua first, make sure no one could interfere, but I should have just—"

"Just what?" Shen Qingqiu cut him off. His chin lifted, defiant even now, even bound and bleeding and shaking with cold. "Just come kill me? Get your revenge? I understand, Binghe. I do. After what I did to you—"

"*Kill you?*"

The words came out strangled. Incredulous. Like Shizun had just suggested the sky was green or water flowed upward.

His hands trembled against Shizun's face. Something in his chest was cracking, fissures spreading through whatever walls he'd built to survive the Abyss. He had held onto the memory of this face like a lifeline. Had killed for it. Bled for it. Clawed his way out of hell because of it.

And Shizun looked at him like he was the thing that should have stayed buried.

"Is that really what you think of me? That I could ever—Shizun, I would *never*—" His voice failed. "You don't understand anything. You never did."

His thumb brushed the hollow beneath Shen Qingqiu's eye, catching the dampness there. Tears or water from the prison, he couldn't tell. Shizun went rigid under the touch—every muscle locking tight, breath held, like a rabbit frozen before the hawk's descent.

After everything—after all of it—you still think I came here to hurt you.

And Luo Binghe thought, with a clarity that would have been impossible an hour ago with Xin Mo's whispers clouding his mind: *I will destroy everyone who made him afraid. I will burn Huan Hua to the ground. I will carve my devotion into the bones of this world until there is nowhere Shizun can go that is not safe, not protected, not mine.*

But he didn't say any of that. Couldn't. Could only kneel there on the cold floor, hands cradling the face he had loved since he was fifteen years old, and try to make Shizun understand something that had no words.

"What do you want from me?" Shizun's voice came out small. Tired. The voice of a man who had stopped fighting.

Everything. I want everything. I want you to look at me the way you looked at those paintings. I want to crawl inside your chest and live there. I want to devour you whole so no one else can ever touch you again. I want—

"I don't know," he said instead. The lie tasted like ash.

Then he leaned in and kissed him.

It wasn't gentle. Luo Binghe kissed him like a drowning man breaching the surface, like a starving man given bread, like every desperate wanting thing he'd buried in the Abyss had clawed its way out at once. His hands tangled in Shen Qingqiu's wet hair, angling his head, cradling his skull like something precious even as his mouth demanded *more, more, more—*

See me. Not him. Not a ghost. ME.

Shizun made a sound—shock, confusion, something small and wounded—and Luo Binghe swallowed it. Kissed him harder. Trying to pour years of longing into this single point of contact, trying to make Shizun *understand—*

But Shizun wasn't kissing him back.

The realization hit like cold water. Like the Endless Abyss opening beneath his feet all over again.

Luo Binghe pulled away, breathing hard.

【POWER SOURCE RESTORED】

Shen Qingqiu's mind was blank. Static. The kiss had short-circuited something vital in his brain and he couldn't—

"But—" he gasped. "Your harem—the Palace Master's daughter—"

Luo Binghe's laugh was harsh. "My *harem*? The Palace Masters daughter? Is that what they told you? That I was here to marry her?"

He leaned closer.

"I would rather cut off my own hands than touch that woman. I executed an entire delegation of demons who tried to give me a harem. I told the entire realm I would only ever take one partner." His voice dropped. "One. And it was never going to be *her*."

But this is a stallion novel—

The protagonist doesn't—

He's not supposed to—

"No," Shen Qingqiu said weakly, scrambling for solid ground, "You can't—I pushed you into —you hate me—"

"I do," Luo Binghe said. Raw. Unflinching. "I hate you. I hate that you sent me away. I hate that every day in that pit, I thought about you. Dreamed about you. Screamed for you until my throat bled."

His forehead came to rest against Shen Qingqiu’s.

"But I also love you. I've always loved you. Even when I wanted to hate you. It's always been you, Shizun. Always. Only."

But the protagonist is straight.

The protagonist had six hundred wives.

This was not how the genre worked.

【SYSTEM NOTICE: GENRE UPDATE DETECTED】

"You can't love me. You're—"

You're supposed to want busty demon queens and delicate fairy maidens and women with heaving bosoms who swoon at your feet!

This is not how this story works—

You're not GAY—

"—you're not—"

"Not what?" Luo Binghe's jaw tightened hard enough to ache, his expression flickering—confusion, then hurt, then something sharp and dangerous beneath it. His hands trembled where they held Shen Qingqiu, grip tightening before he seemed to catch himself.

"Not worthy?" His voice came out strained. "Not good enough?"

His eyes searched Shen Qingqiu's face desperately, like he was looking for an answer he already dreaded. When he spoke again, his voice dropped, rough and bleeding.

"Not *him?*"

The word hung in the cold air between them. Heavy. Weighted with something Shen Qingqiu couldn't parse.

Him?

Shen Qingqiu's mind scrambled for purchase, for context, for *anything* that would make this make sense.

Him who? What *him?* Why had Binghe just kissed him? Why had Binghe kissed him like *that?* Was this a demon thing? A revenge thing? Some kind of elaborate humiliation ritual?

Binghe hated him. Binghe was here for revenge. Binghe was supposed to be killing him, not —not *kissing* him—and what did any of this have to do with some mysterious *him*—

Had the protagonist gone *insane?*

Had *Shen Qingqiu* gone insane?

"...not *who?*"

The question came out small. Bewildered. He sounded, even to his own ears, like a man who had walked into the wrong room and found everyone speaking a different language.

Something in Luo Binghe's expression shattered. It was the kind of expression that belonged on tragic opera heroes, on spurned lovers throwing themselves into rivers.

"Don't." His hands were shaking where they still cradled Shen Qingqiu's face. "Don't pretend you don't know. I saw the alcove, Shizun."

Shen Qingqiu's brain screeched to a halt, every higher function crashing simultaneously.

He saw the alcove.

He saw the ALCOVE.

HE SAW—

Luo Binghe had seen his fan art. His secret, creepy, obsessive fan art of his own disciple that he'd hidden away like a shameful goblin hoard.

I want to die, Shen Qingqiu thought with perfect clarity. *I want the ground to open up and swallow me whole. Just send me to the Abyss and let me stay there forever.*

"I don't—what are you—" he stammered, face burning despite the cold.

Of all the ways he'd imagined dying in this world—carved up by the blackened protagonist, burned for his sins, eaten by a random demon beast—death by humiliation had not been on the list. And yet here he was.

"The paintings. The sculptures. *Years* of work, hidden away like a shrine." Luo Binghe's voice cracked, wet and wrecked.

No! Stop! DON'T ACTUALLY DESCRIBE IT!

Shen Qingqiu's face was burning. His stomach had dropped somewhere around his knees and showed no signs of returning.

"I saw everything, " Luo Binghe said, soft and wounded—completely unaware that each word was a fresh hell.

Every nerve in Shen Qingqiu's body screamed for escape, for invisibility, for a sudden and permanent teleportation anywhere else but here. He wanted the corrosive lake below to rise up and dissolve him on the spot.

"Was I ever anything more to you than a pale imitation?" Luo Binghe whispered. "When you looked at me, did you see me? Or did you just see his face? His blood?"

The raw anguish in his voice was so genuine that Shen Qingqiu almost felt guilty—before his brain caught up with the actual words.

Wait.

His face? His blood?

The embarrassment nearly evaporated, replaced by utter confusion.

His confusion must have shown, because Luo Binghe answered before he could ask anything.

"My father," Luo Binghe said flatly. "Tianlang-Jun. The one you loved. The one you spent years immortalizing in secret while I was right there, desperate for any scrap of your attention."

...What?

Silence.

Shen Qingqiu stared at him.

Luo Binghe stared back, all wounded dignity and shattered heart, clearly waiting for Shen Qingqiu to break down and confess his decades-long passion for a demon emperor he had literally never met.

"...Tianlang-Jun," Shen Qingqiu repeated slowly, like the words might rearrange themselves into something that made sense.

"I visited him," Luo Binghe's jaw tightened. "I know what my father looks like, Shizun."

You visited—when did you—WHY would you—

Shen Qingqiu's brain was producing nothing but static and screaming.

"You think those paintings were of *Tianlang-Jun*." The hysteria bubbling up in his chest was either a laugh or a scream, he couldn't tell which. Of all the absurd, ridiculous, completely insane misunderstandings—this one took the entire banquet table and then came back for the chairs.

"Yes." Something complicated crossed Luo Binghe's face—hurt and jealousy and, underneath it all, a petulant note that was almost funny given the circumstances. "He's not in good condition. The years have not been kind. He's half-mad, his skin has gone sallow, his hair is —"

He stopped, but not before his chin lifted slightly, almost defensively. One hand came up to touch his own hair—glossy, well-maintained, cascading over his shoulders in perfect waves —in a gesture that was probably unconscious. Probably.

"The artwork you made was clearly from before his imprisonment. When he was..." A pause. His jaw tightened. "...at his peak. Such as it was."

Shen Qingqiu stared at him. Was Luo Binghe... was he being *competitive* with his own father? Over who was more attractive? Right now? In the middle of his dramatic heartbreak?

The sheer audacity of it knocked something loose in Shen Qingqiu's chest. The hysteria that had been building finally crested.

"You think," Shen Qingqiu said, his voice climbing octaves it had never previously visited, "that I have been secretly in love. With your *father*. Tianlang-Jun. The Tianlang-Jun. Sealed-under-a-mountain Tianlang-Jun. *That* Tianlang-Jun?!"

Each repetition of the name came out more unhinged than the last. Shen Qingqiu could hear himself and could not stop.

His brain, which had been struggling valiantly to process this information, finally threw up its hands and filed the whole situation under "cosmic absurdity."

He had spent years creating artwork of Luo Binghe's future self—every detail memorized, agonized over, every cheekbone and jawline and curl of hair perfected.

And Luo Binghe had looked at all of it and thought: *Ah yes, this must be my father, whom I have also seen, with my own two eyes, in a mirror, every single day of my life.*

So on one hand: relief. Sweet, blessed relief, because at least Luo Binghe hadn't figured out that the paintings were of *him*, which would have been impossible to explain.

But on the other hand: *what the actual fuck.*

"Binghe," Shen Qingqiu said slowly, with the careful pronunciation of someone navigating a verbal minefield blindfolded. "I have never met Tianlang-Jun.”

Luo Binghe's expression crumpled. "You don't have to lie to protect me, Shizun. I know the truth."

"You absolutely do not know the truth!"

"I saw the alcove—"

"You saw the alcove and came to an *insane conclusion*—"

"—I saw the shrine you built to him! The way you painted him with—with *devotion*—"

"It's not a *shrine*—"

"There were *dozens* of them, Shizun! Paintings and sculptures and—"

"THAT'S CALLED A HOBBY!"

The words echoed off the stone walls of the water prison. Neither of them moved.

Shen Qingqiu became suddenly, horribly aware that he was still bound, still half-frozen, still kneeling in a prison cell—and he had just screamed about his *hobbies* at the most powerful demon lord in three realms.

This was not his finest moment.

"That's not—I wasn't—" Shen Qingqiu's voice cracked with frustration. His mind was racing, grasping for any explanation that wouldn't involve transmigration or stallion novels or the embarrassing truth that he'd basically been running a one-man fan convention in his secret room.

He opened his mouth to try anyway—maybe he could get *something* out, some fragment of the truth that wouldn't trigger the System's restrictions—

【SYSTEM WARNING: Revealing transmigration origins to native characters will result in immediate point deduction and potential forced system reset.】

The words died in his throat like someone had wrapped a hand around his vocal cords and *squeezed*.

Right. Of course. The System would rather he choke to death on his own secrets than let him explain anything useful.

And then—because the universe apparently felt he wasn't suffering enough—his chest seized. Without a Cure, choosing its moment with truly impeccable dramatic timing.

No no no not now—

"Shizun?" Luo Binghe steadied him as his body convulsed. "What—"

"Poison," Shen Qingqiu gasped. "Without a Cure—need Mu Qingfang—"

Luo Binghe's spiritual energy flared, red and black and overwhelming. His claws—*when had he grown claws, that was new, that was extremely*—sliced through the Immortal-Binding Cables like paper.

So cool, some delirious part of his brain noted.

Oh no, a different and deeply unhelpful part of Shen Qingqiu's brain suddenly realized. *Oh no, that's so hot.*

This was not the time. This was absolutely not the time.

His legs gave out anyway.

Strong arms caught him. Warm qi flooded his meridians—demonic energy, surprisingly gentle.

"That's helping, but I need—"

"Mu Qingfang. I know." Frustration crossed Luo Binghe's face. "This stupid disciple left Xin Mo in my rooms."

Why would you leave Xin Mo behind? In three million words, you never—

But he couldn't hold onto the thought.

"Don't you dare die, Shizun. I haven't—we haven't—"

He stopped. Swallowed.

"Just don't."

Then he was gone.

Shen Qingqiu slumped against the cold stone, chest burning. The effects of Without a Cure were receding—Binghe's demonic qi had helped more than he'd expected—but he was still so weak. Still shaking. Still trying to process the fact that Luo Binghe had *kissed him* and *confessed his love* and also thought Shen Qingqiu had been pining for his *father* this whole time.

His life was a disaster. An absolute catastrophe of misunderstandings, poor timing, and utter cosmic betrayal.

A sound. Wrong. Not footsteps—something scraping, sliding.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes snapped open.

The thing filling the doorway was massive. Twenty feet of coiled scales, gleaming faintly in the torchlight. A snake demon, sliding onto the platform with a grace that seemed impossible for something its size.

"Shen-zhenren," the demon hissed, voice oddly polite. "Apologiesss for the intrusion. But we must be going now."

"What—"

The snake's tail wrapped around him—surprisingly gentle despite—and lifted him off the platform.

"Wait—" Shen Qingqiu tried to struggle, but the Without a Cure had drained him and the cables had left him weak and he had exactly zero leverage against a giant snake demon. "Who—what are you—"

"I'm ressscuing you," the snake said, sounding almost offended that he'd asked. "By my uncle's ordersss."

Uncle. Uncle?

Before Shen Qingqiu could ask what uncle, the snake's jaw unhinged.

Oh, he thought distantly. *Oh no.*

Then there was darkness—slick, warm, suffocating. He had a moment of pure animal panic before he realized he wasn't being digested. A thin membrane of demonic energy surrounded him, shielding him from the acid.

Oh, he thought, hazy with confusion and horror. *I'm not being digested.*

How considerate.

And then.

Oh no, I'm being kidnapped—

The darkness swallowed the rest of his thoughts.

Zhuzhi-Lang did not particularly enjoy swallowing people.

It was efficient, yes. The acid curtains around the prison would have burned anyone he tried to carry out normally, and his serpent form could withstand damage his human body couldn't. Transporting Shen Qingqiu inside himself, protected by a qi barrier, was simply the most practical solution.

It was not, as he would be told later by his uncle, aesthetic.

By the time he returned to his uncle's hidden estate, leaving a scorched trail of shattered formations behind him, Shen Qingqiu was unconscious and half-curled inside a rapidly dissolving barrier within his stomach.

He coughed the man out carefully, shifted forms, and collapsed to one knee as Tianlang-Jun approached.

“Task complete,” Zhuzhi-Lang rasped. His throat was raw, his scales cracked and sloughing off in burnt patches. He bowed, panting. “He is alive.”

Tianlang-Jun looked past him to the soaking-wet, limp figure crumpled on the floor.

A beat of silence.

Then, a sigh.

"I said rescue him," Tianlang-Jun muttered, "Not *ingest* him."

Zhuzhi-Lang blinked. “Was this not… effective?”

Tianlang-Jun waved a hand at the scorched floors and mucus-slicked Shen Qingqiu. “This could have been a dashing rescue, nephew. A sweeping romantic tableau. Instead, it looks like a failed alchemy experiment. I had imagined something more like… a bridal carry. Possibly dramatic robes in the wind. A *moment*.”

Zhuzhi-Lang blinked again. “There were acid curtains,” he said, sounding genuinely confused.

“Ah, my dear nephew,” he said mournfully. “So loyal. So efficient. So utterly devoid of flair.”

He sighed, long-suffering. “Is it so much to ask for a little aesthetic sensibility during a prison break? Truly, I suffer for my vision.”

On the floor, Shen Qingqiu stirred weakly, made a sound that might have been a word, and passed out again.

Tianlang-Jun looked down at him with an expression caught between fascination and dismay.

"Well, well," he said, tilting his head. "Even covered in slime, he still manages to look pretty. I'm very impressed. That takes talent."

Chapter End Notes

What SQQ is trying to say: BUT YOU'RE NOT GAY
What LBH hears: But I'm not my father?! Why won't you seeee meee 😭

LBH: *mid-heartbreak* anyway my dad looks like shit now. total mess.
SQQ: are you being competitive with your imprisoned father right now
LBH: NO this is about MY LOVE FOR YOU
LBH: ...but also yes

TLJ: rescue him! romantically! billowing robes! bridal carry!
ZZL: swallows him whole
ZZL: he is alive :)
TLJ: nephew.

This chapter was my absolute favorite to write. Thanks so much for all the love—it genuinely makes my day!
Did any line make you laugh out loud? I'm curious which moments landed 👀

Chapter 12: The Cell Was Empty

Chapter Notes

> Double chapter update incoming!
> Thank you so much for all the comments on the last chapter—it makes my day to know the things I wrote at 2am while laughing at myself actually made other people laugh too 💜

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mu Qingfang had been having a quiet evening—a rarity in his profession—when alarms began shrieking through Qian Cao Peak.

Demon presence. Powerful. Inside the mountain's wards.

He'd barely grabbed his medical kit when his door exploded inward.

The figure standing in the doorway looked like death warmed over. Demonic mark blazing, eyes completely black, spiritual energy crackling around him in waves that made Mu Qingfang's hair stand on end. Mu Qingfang had treated patients on the brink of qi deviation before. This felt worse—like standing beside a blade held under immense pressure, waiting for the moment it slipped.

"Without a Cure flare-up," the young man—demon?—snarled. "Shen Qingqiu. Water prison at Huan Hua. Now."

Mu Qingfang's medical training kicked in before his sense of self-preservation could tell him this was a terrible idea. "How long? Have his meridians—"

"Does it look like I have time for questions?" The demon's eyes had gone completely crimson. "Come with me or I'll drag you."

Mu Qingfang grabbed his medical kit and let himself be half-dragged through some kind of spatial portal that made his stomach turn inside out.

They landed in a corridor of Huan Hua Palace—and immediately, Mu Qingfang knew something was very wrong.

The sect was in chaos.

Disciples ran past them without even registering their presence, too focused on whatever crisis had already erupted. Alarm bells were ringing from multiple directions. Someone was

shouting about structural damage to the eastern wing. The air smelled of dust and something acrid, reptilian.

Beside him, the young man who had dragged him here had gone very still.

Mu Qingfang glanced at him—and blinked.

The demonic mark was gone. The crimson eyes had faded to dark, human brown. The oppressive spiritual pressure that had made Mu Qingfang's bones ache had... not disappeared, exactly, but compressed. Contained. If Mu Qingfang hadn't felt it himself just moments ago, he might have believed the young man was simply a talented cultivator with an unusually powerful sword.

Impressive control, some clinical part of his mind noted. He'd seen cultivators who worked with demonic artifacts before—the energy tended to bleed, to leave traces that any trained healer could detect. But this... this was different. Deliberate. The kind of suppression that spoke to long practice.

Or perhaps not suppression at all. Perhaps what Mu Qingfang had seen in that doorway wasn't demonic contamination from a weapon, but something far more fundamental.

He'd been so certain he'd seen a mark on the boy's brow. A demon mark. But now, looking at that carefully composed face, he couldn't be sure of anything.

And then the face registered. Actually registered.

Mu Qingfang's breath caught.

Luo Binghe.

Shen Qingqiu's beloved disciple. The boy who had fallen into the Endless Abyss at the Immortal Alliance Conference over three years ago. The disciple Shen Qingqiu had mourned with a grief so profound and so private that even Mu Qingfang, who had treated the man for spiritual instability in the aftermath, had never fully understood its depths.

The disciple who was supposed to be dead.

The water prison's entrance gaped open. Or rather—the wall where the entrance should have been gaped open, a massive hole torn through stone and ward-work alike. Rubble scattered across the corridor. The unmistakable tracks of something huge having passed through, gouging the floor in long parallel lines.

More disciples had gathered here, some tending to injured guards, others staring at the destruction with shell-shocked expressions. A senior cultivator was barking orders about containment and structural assessment.

"—came out of nowhere—"

"—size of a building, I swear—"

"—nothing could stop it—"

Luo Binghe pushed through them like they weren't there. Mu Qingfang followed in his wake, trying not to step on anyone.

The cell was empty.

Luo Binghe stood in the center of the cell, staring at the empty platform. His hands were clenched into fists so tight his knuckles had gone white.

"He was here," Luo Binghe said. His voice was eerily calm. Too calm. "I left him here. I told him—" He stopped. "He was here."

"Luo-shizi," Mu Qingfang started carefully. "Perhaps if we—"

The cell exploded.

Not literally. But Luo Binghe's spiritual energy erupted outward in a wave of pure power that sent Mu Qingfang stumbling back. The already-cracked stone walls fractured further.

Mu Qingfang steadied himself against the doorframe, heart pounding. That energy—for just a moment, before Luo Binghe pulled it back under control—had felt exactly like what he'd sensed in that doorway on Qian Cao Peak. Dark. Demonic in a way that had nothing to do with swords or artifacts.

He was a healer. He had spent decades learning to read spiritual signatures, to diagnose corruption and contamination, to distinguish between a cultivator who had been *exposed* to demonic energy and one who *was* demonic energy. What he'd just felt hadn't been external. It had come from Luo Binghe himself, rising from his core like blood from a wound.

But when he looked at Luo Binghe now, as the young man rushed out of the cell, there was nothing to see. Just a young man with a pale face and clenched fists, his spiritual energy once again compressed into something that read as merely powerful rather than inhuman.

As if that eruption had never happened. As if Mu Qingfang had imagined it.

He hadn't imagined it.

Shen Qingqiu, Mu Qingfang thought, with a calm that surprised him, *what exactly did you raise on Qing Jing Peak?*

The boy—the young man—the *demon*—had come to Mu Qingfang for help. Had dragged a healer through a special tear because his former master needed medical attention.

Whatever Luo Binghe was, whatever had happened to him in those years everyone believed him dead—he still wanted to save Shen Qingqiu.

That would have to be enough, for now.

"WHO TOOK HIM!" Luo Binghe's voice cut through the chaos outside like thunder, silencing the frantic chatter of disciples instantly. "WHO DARED—"

The crowd at the entrance had grown. Guards who'd been dealing with the aftermath of the attack. Disciples who'd come running at the new surge of power. Even a few visiting cultivators who looked like they deeply regretted their timing.

"You," Luo Binghe said, pointing at the nearest guard. "The prisoner who was here. Where is he."

The guard's face had gone gray. He was clutching a bandaged arm—injured in the attack, presumably. "I-I don't know, I was just on my rounds when the wall came down and—"

"The snake," another guard cut in, voice shaking. "It came through the outer wall first, then tore through here. We tried to stop it but our attacks just—bounced off."

"A snake," Luo Binghe repeated flatly.

"It—it was unstoppable." The guard looked sick. "And then it just... left. Went back the way it came. We've been trying to account for everyone, but in the chaos—"

"What is going on here?"

The Little Palace Mistress's voice cut through the crowd, sharp with authority. She shoved her way to the front of the crowd with two attendants trailing behind her looking frazzled. Her eyes swept the corridor—the rubble, the injured guards, the destroyed wall—and then fixed on the empty cell. Her face went through a rapid series of expressions: confusion, realization, fury.

"The prisoner," she breathed. "Where's the prisoner?"

No one answered.

"Where is Shen Qingqiu?" she demanded, voice rising. "Don't tell me—" She whirled on the nearest guard. "The snake demon. Did anyone see it take him? Did he escape in the confusion?"

"No one saw the prisoner leave, Little Palace Mistress," the guard said miserably. "The snake came through, caused chaos, and then retreated. When we checked the cell afterward, he was just... gone."

"Then it took him." Her expression hardened into something ugly. "The snake demon must have taken him. I knew it—I knew he was colluding with demons! He arranged his own rescue—"

"You," Luo Binghe said softly.

She faltered, finally registering his presence among the crowd. "Luo-shixiong?"

"You're the one who whipped him."

The color drained from her face. "I—what—how did you—"

"Gongyi Xiao told me." Luo Binghe stepped toward her, slow and deliberate.

"He was a prisoner!" She rallied, drawing herself up. "A criminal accused of colluding with demons—which this attack proves, by the way—"

"He was innocent."

"He was corrupting you! Father said—"

"Your father," Luo Binghe interrupted, "has decided to go into seclusion. Effective immediately." His smile didn't reach his eyes. "He was quite insistent about it. Named me his successor before he withdrew."

Dead silence.

The Little Palace Mistress's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

"That's impossible," she finally managed. "Father would never—he didn't say anything about —"

"Captain Zhang," Luo Binghe said, not taking his eyes off her. "You're head of the Palace Master's personal guard, are you not?"

A middle-aged man in officer's armor stepped forward, looking deeply uncomfortable. "I am."

"Tell her."

Captain Zhang swallowed. "The Palace Master... summoned his senior guards this afternoon. He informed us that he would be entering closed-door cultivation for an indefinite period and that..." He glanced at Luo Binghe. "That Luo-gongzi would be acting in his stead. We were instructed to follow Luo-gongzi's orders as though they came from the Palace Master himself."

"That can't be right." The Little Palace Mistress's voice had gone thin. "Father wouldn't—he wouldn't just hand over the sect to—"

"The Palace Master was very clear," Captain Zhang said. There was something careful in his tone, something that suggested he had his own questions but knew better than to voice them. "His instructions were explicit."

Mu Qingfang watched the exchange with growing unease. The guard captain's confirmation had been immediate. Specific. The kind of testimony that came from someone who had genuinely received orders—or who had been made to believe he had.

He thought again of that demonic energy. Of the mark he'd seen—or thought he'd seen—blazing on Luo Binghe's brow.

What exactly had happened in the Palace Master's chambers this afternoon?

Mu Qingfang was a healer, not a politician. But he knew enough about demonic cultivation to understand that there were methods. Ways to compel obedience. Ways to make a man believe something was his own idea when it had been planted there by force.

The Old Palace Master had been in good health at the last cultivation conference. No signs of spiritual instability, no whispers of seclusion. And now he had handed his sect to a young man whom Mu Qingfang thought was dead at the bottom of the Endless Abyss until just a moment ago.

Mu Qingfang looked at Luo Binghe. At the cold, controlled mask that had replaced the eager boy who used to trail after Shen Qingqiu like a shadow.

Does Shen Qingqiu know? he wondered. *Does he know his disciple is alive? Does he know what he's become?*

Years of grief. And the whole time—

He had no answers. Only questions he suspected he wouldn't like the answers to.

"Anyone who wishes to disturb the Palace Master's meditation to verify is welcome to try," Luo Binghe said, addressing the crowd now. His voice was pleasant. Reasonable. "Though I would advise against it. He was very clear about not wanting to be interrupted."

No one moved.

No one spoke.

The silence stretched, taut as a bowstring.

"Good," Luo Binghe said finally. He turned back to the Little Palace Mistress, and his expression shifted into something cold and satisfied. "Now. About you."

"I didn't do anything wrong," she said, but her voice had lost its conviction. "He was a prisoner—"

"He was under my protection." Each word landed like a stone. "And you whipped him."

Luo Binghe tilted his head, considering her the way one might consider a particularly irritating insect. "You know what I find interesting? You didn't whip him because you thought he was guilty. You whipped him because you were *jealous*."

Her face flushed an ugly red. "I was not—"

"You were. Are. It's written all over you." Luo Binghe's voice was pleasant, conversational, utterly terrifying. "You couldn't stand that I looked at him instead of you. That I wanted him instead of whatever it was you thought you were offering."

A ripple went through the crowd. Mu Qingfang caught the sharp intake of breath from a nearby disciple, the widened eyes, the way glances darted between Luo Binghe and the Little Palace Mistress and then—inevitably—toward the ruined cell where Shen Qingqiu had been held.

Wanted him.

Mu Qingfang raised an eyebrow. Well. That was certainly one way to phrase a teacher-student relationship.

"How dare you," the Little Palace Mistress spat. Her composure had cracked entirely now, her face blotchy with rage and humiliation. "I am the daughter of the Palace Master! I was doing you a kindness by showing interest in someone like you, and you rejected me for that—that—"

Luo Binghe moved.

One moment he was standing three paces away. The next, his hand was around her throat—not squeezing, not yet, but present. A promise.

The Little Palace Mistress made a choked sound that might have been a scream if she'd had the air for it.

"Finish that sentence," Luo Binghe said quietly. "Please."

She didn't.

No one in the crowd so much as breathed.

Luo Binghe held her there for a long moment—long enough for the tears to start sliding down her cheeks, long enough for the reality of her situation to sink in fully. Then he released her, stepping back as she crumpled, gasping.

"Luo-shixiong—" Gongyi Xiao had appeared at the edge of the crowd, looking like he'd run here from wherever he'd been dealing with the aftermath of the attack. His face was ashen. "Please, she—"

"So here's what's going to happen." Luo Binghe spoke over him without raising his voice, as if nothing had happened. "The Little Palace Mistress will be taken to the detention cells. Not her quarters—the cells. The same ones she was so eager to visit when my Shizun was occupying them."

The Little Palace Mistress made a strangled noise of protest, but one look at Luo Binghe's face and she swallowed it.

"She can wait there until I return," Luo Binghe continued. "And then she and I will have a conversation about the full extent of her... disciplinary measures. Every detail of what she did to him. How many times. Whether anyone assisted her."

His gaze swept the crowd, and more than a few disciples flinched.

"I'm sure she'll be eager to cooperate." Luo Binghe's smile was pleasant and utterly without warmth. "She wanted to teach my Shizun a lesson about his place. It's only fair she learns something about hers."

Mu Qingfang felt a chill that had nothing to do with the night air. The Little Palace Mistress would sit in those cells, waiting, not knowing when Luo Binghe would return or what he would do when he did. Sometimes anticipation was its own kind of torture.

"You can't—" She was still on the ground, one hand at her throat, voice raspy. "Father will never allow—"

"Your father is in seclusion. And I am in charge." He gestured to two of the nearest guards, who looked like they desperately wished they were anywhere else. "Take her. And if she resists—" He shrugged.

The guards glanced at Captain Zhang. The captain gave a short, sharp nod.

That settled it. They moved forward, flanking the Little Palace Mistress with the careful efficiency of men who had decided that following orders was safer than asking questions.

As they led her away, her protests echoing down the corridor, Luo Binghe turned to Gongyi Xiao. The head disciple looked pale but steady, which was more than could be said for most of the people present.

"You tended to him," Luo Binghe said. "In the prison. Brought him water. Told me about the whipping."

"I did," Gongyi Xiao confirmed carefully. "He was—he shouldn't have been there. The evidence was clearly fabricated. I tried to make his situation more bearable, but..." He glanced at the empty cell. "I should have done more."

"You have three days." Luo Binghe's voice shifted back to command. "Three days to stabilize this sect's affairs in my absence. Reassure the disciples. Send messages to the other peaks that there's been a change in leadership. Handle the damage from the attack." His eyes narrowed. "Keep her confined. If there are any problems, I will hold you personally responsible."

"Where are you going?" Mu Qingfang asked before he could stop himself.

Luo Binghe's expression was grim. "To get back what was stolen from me."

Chapter End Notes

LPM: I was not jealous!
LBH: I wanted him instead of you!
Everyone: 👀
MQF: I'm just the healer. I'm just here to heal people.

Chapter 13: The Rival He Made Himself

Chapter Notes

> The love for this fic has been overwhelming 💜 Every kudos, every comment, every keysmash in the comments section—I treasure them all. Thank you for joining me on this journey of increasingly escalating misunderstandings. I love that we're all collectively losing our minds over these oblivious disasters together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shang Qinghua had been having a perfectly reasonable panic attack in the war room—one of the mild ones, barely even a six on his personal terror scale—when reality split open like wet paper and Luo Binghe materialized through the spatial tear looking like murder given human form and a really bad day.

"My lord!" Shang Qinghua yelped, executing what he privately called his "survival bow"—the kind where you went down fast and stayed down until the threat passed. Several demons scrambled toward the exits with impressive speed. Smart. Shang Qinghua wished he could join them. "The wards detected the demon presence when you took Mu Qingfang—everyone's in an uproar—I was just about to report—"

"Silence," Luo Binghe said. The word cracked like a whip. "Shen Qingqiu has been taken."

Shang Qinghua blinked. "I—yes? I reported that to you? The water prison at Huan Hua?"

"*No*." Luo Binghe's voice had gone very cold. Very dangerous. "Taken *from* the prison. I went to get Mu Qingfang to help with a Without a Cure flare-up. When I returned, my Shizun was gone. Someone had torn through the walls. A giant snake demon."

Shang Qinghua's brain stalled. "Giant snake demon?"

"The guards said a man appeared first. Walked right through the wards like they weren't there." Luo Binghe's hands clenched at his sides. "Then he transformed. Became a snake the size of a building and tore through the prison walls."

A man who could transform into a giant snake.

A snake demon powerful enough to—

Oh no.

There was only one demon in existence who could do what Luo Binghe was describing.

"Zhuzhi-Lang," he breathed.

Mobei-Jun's head turned sharply. "You're certain?"

"It has to be." Shang Qinghua's voice came out slightly strangled. "A snake demon that powerful, who can shift between human and serpent forms? There's only one. Zhuzhi-Lang. Tianlang-Jun's nephew and—and general."

The room went very quiet.

"But that's impossible," Shang Qinghua continued, talking faster now because apparently his mouth had decided to keep going without consulting his survival instincts. "Zhuzhi-Lang can't take his humanoid form without help. He's powerful, but he's half-blood—his father was a lesser serpent demon. The only reason he could ever transform in the—in the old histories—was because Tianlang-Jun helped stabilize his bloodline. Without that connection, he'd be stuck in snake form permanently."

"Meaning," Luo Binghe said flatly.

Shang Qinghua swallowed hard. "Meaning if Zhuzhi-Lang is walking around in human form and then transforming at will... Tianlang-Jun must have helped him. Which means—"

"My father is free."

Shang Qinghua watched Luo Binghe's expression—that careful blankness that was somehow more terrifying than open rage. Several demons edged toward the exits.

“My father," Luo Binghe said, "sent his general to steal my Shizun."

The air in the war room had gone thick. Heavy. The demons near the doors had given up any pretense of remaining and simply vanished.

"But *why*?" Shang Qinghua heard himself ask, genuinely baffled. What possible reason could Tianlang-Jun have for kidnapping a random peak lord he'd never met? This made no sense. None of this made any sense—

Something flickered across Luo Binghe's face—there and gone so fast Shang Qinghua almost missed it. Something that looked almost like pain.

And then, in a voice that sounded like it was being dragged over broken glass:

"Because... long ago... before he was sealed..." Luo Binghe's jaw worked. His hands clenched at his sides. He looked like a man being forced to swallow poison. "My father loved Shen Qingqiu."

The words hung in the air like a death sentence.

Shang Qinghua waited for the punchline.

He waited for Luo Binghe to laugh—that bitter, sardonic laugh he'd written for the blackened protagonist in moments of dark humor. He waited for the "just kidding" or the "that's what

that fake evidence suggested, but obviously it's wrong" or literally any indication that Luo Binghe understood how absolutely batshit insane that statement was.

The punchline did not come.

Luo Binghe just stood there, radiating jealous misery, apparently one hundred percent convinced that his absentee demon emperor father had been in a secret romance with his beloved Shizun.

And then he remembered—with the sudden, horrible clarity of a man watching a carriage crash in slow motion—that first meeting after Luo Binghe crawled out of the Abyss. The way the protagonist had pinned him to the floor, Xin Mo crackling with barely-contained violence, and demanded to know everything about Shen Qingqiu. And then he had said—

"Did he ever see me, Shang-shishu? Or was I just an echo of someone else he couldn't have?"

At the time, Shang Qinghua had assumed that was just... protagonist angst. Poetic brooding. The kind of dramatic internal torment that made readers swoon and comment sections explode.

He had not realized Luo Binghe was being *literal*.

He had not realized Luo Binghe had constructed an entire elaborate backstory in which Shen Qingqiu was pining for a lost demon lover, and every kindness shown to Binghe was actually just... residual affection for someone else. Someone Binghe happened to resemble.

But that still didn't explain—

"I don't—" Shang Qinghua started, shaking his head slowly. "Junshang, forgive this one's confusion, but how do you *know* this? Tianlang-Jun was sealed before you were even born. Before Shen Qingqiu was even a peak lord. There's no record of them ever meeting, no—"

"I found proof." The words came out clipped. Reluctant. Like they were being dragged from him against his will. Luo Binghe's jaw had gone tight. He wasn't looking at anyone now, his gaze fixed on some middle distance. "That Shizun had... feelings for someone."

Shang Qinghua waited, hardly daring to breathe. This felt like watching a man approach the edge of a cliff—you knew the fall was coming, you just didn't know how bad it would be.

"A hidden room," Luo Binghe finally said. "Full of paintings and sculptures of a heavenly demon lord who could only have been my father."

Oh.

Oh *no*.

Cucumber-bro had made fan art.

Cucumber-bro made

DEMON LORD LUO BINGHE FAN ART!

Of *course* he had. Of *course* Shen Qingqiu, stuck in the body of a villain with nothing to do but wait for his inevitable death, had taken up art as a hobby. Shang Qinghua didn't know why he was even surprised. This was the same man who had spent years on forums dissecting every detail of Proud Immortal Demon Way, who probably had maintained an entire collection of protagonist merchandise in his previous life. Shang Qinghua would even bet he had owned body pillows. *Multiple* body pillows.

And now, trapped in a cultivation world with no internet and no merch shops, he'd done the only logical thing: made his own.

But Luo Binghe had found it.

And Luo Binghe thought it was his *father*.

"Dozens of them," Luo Binghe continued, and there was something raw in his voice now, something he clearly didn't want to show. "Paintings capturing every angle. Sculptures rendered in exquisite detail. The craftsmanship was—" He stopped. Swallowed. "It was clear that whoever made them had studied their subject obsessively. Knew every line of his face. Every expression."

So the art was good.

The art was clearly, recognizably, *painstakingly* good.

And Luo Binghe had looked at perfect renderings of *his own face* and thought: ah yes, this must be my father, no other explanation possible.

What happened to the protagonist's IQ?! This wasn't even face-blindness, this was... this was some kind of inverse narcissism. The complete inability to recognize yourself in a mirror? Shang Qinghua would have remembered writing that character flaw. He would *never* have written that, because his readers would have rioted at such a stupid plot point—

Except it was happening anyway.

"The power," Luo Binghe said, as if reading from a list of evidence he'd assembled during his spiral into wrong conclusions. "The bearing. The demon mark."

The demon mark that you also have, Shang Qinghua thought hysterically. *The face that is YOUR face. How are you this bad at recognizing yourself?!*

"So I confronted him," Luo Binghe said, and now there was an edge to his voice. "I demanded to know why he'd abandoned someone who clearly—" Another pause. His hands clenched. "Someone who had devoted so much to preserving his image. His memory. Someone who had filled an entire room with proof of their devotion."

The emotion in those words was complicated. Layers of jealousy and hurt and something almost like longing, all wrapped up in that cold, controlled voice. Shang Qinghua's writer

instincts—dormant but not dead—recognized the narrative: a son confronting his absent father, demanding answers about a love rival who was actually... himself.

This was the most convoluted misunderstanding Shang Qinghua had ever witnessed, and he had *written Proud Immortal Demon Way*, which contained no fewer than eighty-seven romantic misunderstandings across its thirty million words. Amateur stuff, all of it, compared to what was unfolding right now.

"And Tianlang-Jun," Luo Binghe continued bitterly, "didn't remember anything." His expression twisted with something that might have been satisfaction in any other context. "But yet the moment I mentioned a devoted lover from his past, he decided that must be someone worth reclaiming."

Shang Qinghua felt genuinely lightheaded.

Luo Binghe had essentially *created his own romantic rival* by handing his father a beautifully detailed description of a former devoted lover pining away for him. And of course Tianlang-Jun didn't remember this supposed lover. They had never even met. But did that stop the Demon Emperor from deciding this sounded terribly romantic and dispatching his nephew to go collect this mysterious devoted admirer?

Apparently not.

Luo Binghe had invented competition for himself and then *lost to it*.

Shang Qinghua stood very still, hoping that if he didn't move, Luo Binghe might forget he existed. His brain was still churning through the implications, each one more absurd than the last.

Cucumber-bro made fan art of the protagonist.

Luo Binghe found the fan art.

Luo Binghe assumed it was his father because of the demon mark, despite the fact that he *also* had a demon mark and the face was *literally his own face*.

Luo Binghe told Tianlang-Jun about it.

Tianlang-Jun, who had been sealed for decades and remembered nothing, decided this sounded like a great love story worth pursuing.

And now Shen Qingqiu had been abducted by Tianlang-Jun because he couldn't resist making fanart of the protagonist.

This was—

This was *exactly* the kind of bullshit that happened in Proud Immortal Demon Way, actually. Shang Qinghua would have been proud of the narrative irony if he weren't so terrified.

"That man who discarded things so easily," Luo Binghe said, and now the bitterness had sharpened into something uglier, "dares to try and reclaim my Shizun?"

Luo Binghe's eyes flashed crimson.

"He doesn't get to do that. He doesn't get to steal what's *mine* because he's suddenly feeling sentimental about a past he can't even remember."

He doesn't remember because it never happened!! Shang Qinghua screamed internally. *There IS no past!! The art is of YOU!! YOUR face!! YOUR demon mark!!*

But he couldn't say any of that. Couldn't explain how he knew.

So instead he stood there, silently losing his mind, while the protagonist of his own story remained tragically unaware that the love of his life had been making thirst art of him this entire time.

"Find him," Luo Binghe ordered, turning to address the room at large. Demon generals and lieutenants who had been trying very hard to become one with the walls suddenly snapped to attention. "Use every resource we have. Spatial tracking. Divination. Interrogation. Scan the border between realms. I don't care what it takes. I want Zhuzhi-Lang's location within the day."

Demons scattered. Orders were barked. The war room transformed into controlled chaos as the forces mobilized with the kind of efficiency that only came from genuine terror of disappointing their overlord.

A hand settled on Shang Qinghua's shoulder.

He startled, then went still as he recognized the familiar chill of Mobei-Jun's touch through his robes. The demon lord had moved to stand beside him at some point, close enough that Shang Qinghua could feel the cold radiating off his skin like winter given form.

"You know the demon realm's history," Mobei-Jun said. His voice was steady. Calm. Like he hadn't just witnessed the most catastrophically stupid misunderstanding in the history of romantic jealousy. "Where would Tianlang-Jun take him?"

The weight of Mobei-Jun's hand was grounding. Solid. A point of contact that said: *I'm asking you. I trust you to have the answer.*

Something warm flickered in Shang Qinghua's chest, entirely inappropriate for the circumstances.

Right. Yes. He was the expert here. Even if the plot had gone completely off the rails—even if the protagonist had accidentally sicced his own father on his love interest through a series of increasingly absurd misunderstandings about *his own face*—Shang Qinghua still knew more about this world's history and geography than anyone else.

He just needed to think.

Where would Tianlang-Jun go?

He'd been sealed for decades. Betrayed by the woman he loved—or so he thought—and the cultivation world that had used her to trap him. If he'd somehow escaped and immediately sent Zhuzhi-Lang to retrieve Shen Qingqiu, believing him to be a long-lost lover...

He wouldn't go anywhere public. Wouldn't risk the cultivation world finding out he was free before he was ready. He'd want somewhere private. Secure. A place where he could recover his strength and... and reconnect with his perceived lost love without interference.

"There were rumors," Shang Qinghua said slowly, the pieces clicking together, old outlines and drafts being remembered, "of a secluded estate on the border between the demon and human realms. Hidden behind layered spatial arrays. Protected. Tianlang-Jun was—he was a scholar, before everything. He had properties everywhere, places to retreat and study. This one was supposed to be his most private. The perfect place to take someone you believe you're rescuing."

Luo Binghe's attention snapped to him like a predator spotting prey. "Where?"

"That's the problem. It's said to have seventeen layers of spatial distortion." Shang Qinghua winced. "And could possibly explode half the demon realm if you breathe wrong near the defense arrays. It’s never been found. It was designed to be unfindable."

"I don't care." Xin Mo flared, crackling with dark energy that made Shang Qinghua's teeth ache. Luo Binghe's eyes had gone fully crimson now, his control slipping. "He abandoned my mother. He abandoned Xin Mo. He abandoned *me*. And now he thinks he can just—" His voice cracked, something raw and wounded bleeding through the rage. "He thinks he can take the one person who—"

Luo Binghe stopped. His jaw worked. He didn't finish the sentence.

He didn't have to.

Shang Qinghua watched the demon lord struggle to contain emotions he clearly didn't want anyone to see, and felt an uncomfortable twist of something that might have been sympathy. This was the protagonist he'd written—the one who'd lost everything, who'd clawed his way out of hell itself, who'd built an empire on spite and heartbreak. And underneath all that power, all that terrifying competence, was still the abandoned boy who just wanted someone to choose him first.

Except the person Luo Binghe thought had chosen someone else... had actually chosen *him*.

The irony was so painful it circled back around to being funny. And then kept going until it was just painful again.

"We'll find him," Mobei-Jun said. The hand on Shang Qinghua's shoulder tightened slightly—whether in warning or reassurance, Shang Qinghua couldn't tell. "We'll find a way through."

Shang Qinghua opened his mouth to protest that he was an intelligence operative, not a spatial array specialist, and also he very much did not want to be anywhere near Tianlang-Jun's legendary defenses—

But then he caught the look on Luo Binghe's face. The raw desperation underneath the rage. The way his knuckles had gone white around Xin Mo's hilt.

This was the protagonist at his most dangerous. Not because of the power crackling around him, but because he was *hurting*. And a hurting Luo Binghe was an unpredictable Luo Binghe.

"Right. Yes. Totally doable," Shang Qinghua said instead, because his survival instincts had finally kicked back in. "We just locate an invisible estate hidden in a pocket dimension, survive its legendary defenses, and retrieve Shen Qingqiu from the most powerful demon emperor in history." He paused, his brain catching up with his mouth. "Who is also your father. Who now thinks he's rescuing a long-lost love he doesn't remember."

He really should have stopped there. He knew he should have stopped there.

"This is fine," he added weakly. "Totally normal family dynamics."

The look Luo Binghe gave him suggested the no-killing-the-spy policy was under very active review.

Mobei-Jun shifted. It was a subtle movement—just a half-step that put him slightly more between Shang Qinghua and Luo Binghe, his hand still resting on Shang Qinghua's shoulder with a grip that had gone just a fraction tighter.

Shang Qinghua felt a rush of gratitude. See, this was why he put up with being thrown into walls and sent on life-threatening errands. Mobei-Jun understood his value. Knew that good intelligence assets were hard to find and harder to replace.

Practical. Calculated. Very much in character.

Luo Binghe's gaze flicked between them—noting Mobei-Jun's protective position, the proprietary hand on Shang Qinghua's shoulder—and something unreadable crossed his face.

"Prepare to move," Luo Binghe said finally, addressing Mobei-Jun now. His voice had gone flat again, controlled. "Once we have the location, I'm taking back what's mine."

Mobei-Jun inclined his head. "As you command."

Luo Binghe turned and strode toward the war room's exit, dark energy still crackling around him like a storm waiting to break.

Shang Qinghua let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Mobei-Jun's hand remained on his shoulder—steady, cool, anchoring.

"That went well," Shang Qinghua said weakly.

Mobei-Jun glanced down at him. Said nothing. But his thumb moved, just slightly—a small brush against Shang Qinghua's shoulder that might have been unconscious.

Probably just adjusting his grip.

Definitely just adjusting his grip.

In the silence of the emptying war room, Shang Qinghua allowed himself exactly three seconds to contemplate the beautiful irony of it all. Cucumber-bro, his number one anti-fan who had spent *years* roasting Proud Immortal Demon Way in forum comments, who had called the romance "derivative" and the plot "held together with spit and prayer," who had written a three-thousand-word essay on why the protagonist's character development was "emotionally stunted wish-fulfillment"—

That guy had made fanart.

Actual fanart.

Beautiful, detailed, obsessive fanart of the protagonist from the story he'd spent so long pretending to hate.

And it was going to get him killed.

Or married. With Luo Binghe, it was honestly a coin flip.

Shang Qinghua made a mental note to never, ever let Shen Qingqiu live this down. Assuming they both survived long enough for him to bring it up.

Somehow, while waiting for Shang Qinghua to find his Shizun’s location, Luo Binghe’s feet had carried him here almost without his permission.

Cang Qiong Mountain at night was beautiful in a way Luo Binghe had almost forgotten.

He'd avoided coming here since emerging from the Abyss. Too many memories. Too much pain. This was the place where he had been loved—and then rejected. Where happiness had been offered, only to be ripped away.

Standing in the familiar bamboo grove, breathing air that still smelled like home, something inside his chest cracked open.

Shang Qinghua had mentioned the memorial. "Your Shizun mourned you," he'd said. "Had your sword reforged. Built a mound. He visits every day."

At the time, Binghe hadn't known what to do with that knowledge. Hadn't known how to reconcile a grieving Shizun with the cold voice that cast him into the Abyss. But now—seeing the sword mound in person, the careful placement, the way it faced the rising sun—

Oh, Shizun.

Inside the bamboo house, everything was exactly as Binghe remembered. Careful. Elegant. Quietly warm. Shen Qingqiu lingered in every detail.

The alcove door stood closed.

Binghe hesitated, heart pounding. He had avoided thinking too deeply about the alcove. About what it meant. About the sculptures and paintings that his Shizun had crafted with so much care.

His hand trembled as it reached for the panel.

Just look. Just confirm what you already know.

He pushed the door open.

For a moment, Binghe simply stood there.

It took him several breaths to understand what he was seeing.

Wait.

Binghe's heart stuttered.

Is this... me?

The pieces were unmistakable once he let himself see it. Dark curls escaping their tie. A particular way of standing.

It's me.

Something in his chest cracked open. This alcove—this hidden place he had always believed held the secrets of his Shizun's heart—and he was seeing himself here.

These are all—

Paintings of a young disciple in Qing Jing robes, brushstrokes soft and careful. A boy offering tea, head slightly bowed. A sculpture capturing a laugh, head thrown back with joy. A watercolor of someone sleeping against a doorframe—and Binghe remembered that day, remembered waking to find a blanket over his shoulders and Shizun pretending not to have been watching.

Dozens of them layered around and between the older works, filling every available surface with a quiet, overwhelming presence that stole the breath from his lungs.

These were memories.

Binghe's throat tightened painfully. He had spent years believing this alcove was a shrine to someone else—proof that Shen Qingqiu's heart had never truly been his. Proof that he had only ever been a replacement, a shadow cast by a love that came before.

And yet here he was.

Here he was.

Not powerful. Not fearsome. Not a demon emperor.

Just a disciple. Just Binghe, as he had been when he followed Shen Qingqiu from room to room, when he brewed tea too strong, when he smiled too easily and believed too completely.

His hands trembled as he reached out and brushed his fingers over the edge of a sculpture. The stone was cool beneath his touch, the craftsmanship flawless. Every curl, every line of expression had been shaped with care that could only come from long observation and familiarity.

"Oh, Shizun," Binghe murmured, his voice barely steady. "You... you did see me."

The realization settled heavily in his chest. Not sharp enough to cut, but deep enough to ache.

Shen Qingqiu had pushed him into the Abyss. That truth had not changed.

But Shen Qingqiu had also mourned him. Had reforged his sword, built a mound, returned to it day after day. And now Binghe stood surrounded by proof that some part of him—some quiet, stubborn part—had never been let go.

Then, Binghe's gaze drifted back to the older sculptures at the center of the alcove. The powerful demon lord.

It was strange to his eyes—seeing them now, years later, after finally meeting his father face to face. The older sculptures no longer looked the way Binghe remembered them. They weren't wrong. Just... heavier? More vital. More present. The kind of demon lord that stories were written about—powerful and proud and utterly certain of his place in the world. Because now that he had seen his father—now that he had stood before the man himself, had catalogued every angle of that face, had watched madness and grief war behind those red eyes—the older pieces of the demon lord looked... different.

And there was a resemblance there he hadn't noticed as a boy. One that unsettled him in ways he wasn't ready to examine.

They looked like—

Binghe's breath caught.

No.

He forced himself to look more closely. The strong jaw. The high cheekbones. The particular angle of the brow that he had always assumed was artistic interpretation but now seemed almost familiar, as if he might see something similar if he looked in a mirror.

That doesn't mean anything.

Tianlang-Jun had been sealed for seventeen years. Isolation changes people. Memory blurs. Impressions shift. It was far too easy to reinterpret the past once new knowledge crept in—to see connections that hadn't been there at the time. Besides, wasn't the man in these sculptures in essence different from the broken creature in that underground prison? Nothing like the rambling madman who couldn't separate his own memories from fiction.

But...

Maybe...

Just maybe...

Maybe he looked more like his father than he had ever wanted to admit.

He would not let himself unravel here. Not now. Not when Shen Qingqiu was still missing.

Binghe committed the sight of each piece to memory, then carefully closed the alcove door behind him.

He had a snake demon to find.

And a Shizun to reclaim.

The answers could wait.

Chapter End Notes

MBJ: *protective hand on shoulder*
MBJ: *steps between SQH and danger*
SQH: wow he really values my intel work :)

LBH: Wait... is this... me?
LBH: No, impossible. Must be my father.
LBH: Wow, I really do look like him.
Readers: BINGHE NO
Binghe you were so close to figuring it out!!!

Chapter 14: The Kidnapper Is Unfortunately Attractive (Stop Noticing This)

Chapter Notes

> Canon does not specify exactly how long Tianlang-Jun's mushroom body took to grow or whether its limitations were immediate. In this story, I'm working with the headcanon that demonic energy accelerates the growth of a mushroom body but destabilizes it over time. As a result, Tianlang-Jun initially appears much closer to his original form after the body's completion, with the deterioration seen in canon emerging only years later.
>
> (This is my excuse for why he gets to be a hot silver fox demon emperor instead of immediately looking like a sad mushroom man)
>
> Happy New Year everyone! I couldn't let 2025 end without giving you SQQ's "oh no he's hot" crisis. This chapter was my absolute favorite to write and I can't wait to see your reactions!
>
> Thanks again for all the kudos, comments, and bookmarks. Stay safe, have fun, and see you in 2026! 🎉

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Qingqiu woke up warm.

This was so unexpected—so contrary to his recent lived experience—that for a moment he couldn't process it. Warm. Dry. Comfortable. In a bed with soft linens and multiple pillows. The kind of bed that suggested someone had opinions about interior design.

He opened his eyes.

The ceiling above him was painted with murals of stars and constellations, done in silver and gold that caught the light. The walls were silk panels in deep blues and purples. Everything about the room screamed wealth and taste and a decorator who took their work very seriously.

Well, Shen Qingqiu thought distantly. *This is different.*

He managed to prop himself up on his elbows, his body protesting with the special kind of ache that said "you were recently tortured and suffering from a poison flare up and possibly hallucinating." The room was larger than it had appeared at first glance—a sitting area by the window, a desk covered in papers and scrolls, multiple doors leading to what he assumed were other rooms. And everywhere were signs of life. Books stacked haphazardly. Tea cups left half-finished. A robe draped over a chair like someone had just taken it off.

It felt lived-in. Comfortable. Like someone's actual home rather than a prison cell.

Which was suspicious. Very suspicious.

The door opened.

Shen Qingqiu's hand went instinctively for his sword—which wasn't there, because of course it wasn't—before he registered who was entering.

The man was tall. Inhumanly beautiful in the way demons often were, with sharp features and long dark hair that fell past his shoulders in waves. He wore robes in blacks and deep reds that managed to look both elegant and vaguely threatening.

And on his forehead, blazing like a brand: the unmistakable mark of a heavenly demon.

Oh, Shen Qingqiu thought. *Oh, fuck.*

This was Tianlang-Jun. *The* Tianlang-Jun. Luo Binghe's father. The sealed Demon Emperor. The man who—according to Luo Binghe's massive misunderstanding of his secret room—Shen Qingqiu had been secretly pining for.

He was also, Shen Qingqiu's traitorous brain noted, unfairly attractive.

Objectively speaking. In an aesthetic, artistic appreciation sort of way. The same way one might admire a well-crafted sculpture or a particularly striking demon beast right before it tried to eat you.

Not in the way Luo Binghe was attractive—all youthful intensity and burning passion and protagonist-grade beauty. This was something different. Tianlang-Jun had the kind of face that suggested he'd been devastating in his youth and had only gotten more interesting with age. There were faint lines at the corners of his eyes—laugh lines, probably, because of course this man laughed—and his ink-black hair had a few strands of silver threaded through it that caught the light like starfire.

Silver fox, Shen Qingqiu's brain supplied unhelpfully. *That's the term. He's a silver fox.*

Well. It made sense, didn't it? Protagonist-grade beauty had to come from somewhere. Luo Binghe had clearly inherited good genes. Shen Qingqiu was simply observing the source material. Appreciating the craftsmanship, as it were.

This was perfectly normal. Anyone would notice. It was basically science.

SHUT UP, he told his brain. This is the DEMON EMPEROR. He KIDNAPPED you. Stop being attracted to the kidnapper!

...Not that he was attracted. He was just *noticing*. There was a difference.

"You're awake," Tianlang-Jun said.

His voice was warm and rich and touched with amusement, like everything in the world was a delightful joke he was inviting you to share.

"I was starting to worry," Tianlang-Jun continued, moving into the room with the easy grace of someone who had never questioned whether he belonged anywhere. "Zhuzhi-Lang said you were having some kind of poison flare-up when he retrieved you."

Retrieved. Not kidnapped. Not abducted. *Retrieved,* like Shen Qingqiu was a parcel that had gotten lost in transit.

"Where am I?" Shen Qingqiu managed, his voice rougher than intended.

"My estate. One of them, anyway. But first, you need to eat." Tianlang-Jun set down a tray with tea and medicinal soup on the bedside table.

Shen Qingqiu looked down at himself instead of reaching for the soup.

Clean robes. Black silk with red embroidery—clearly expensive and clearly not his. The sleeves pooled past his fingertips. The collar sat wrong on his frame, designed for broader shoulders.

He was wearing Tianlang-Jun's clothes. In Tianlang-Jun's bed.

Which meant someone had changed him while he was unconscious.

His hand flew to his collar, checking layers with frantic fingers. The heavy outer robe, a thinner middle layer—and beneath that, still there, the thin white silk of his inner robe. The one that sat directly against skin. The one that, in any civilized society, you did not remove from an unconscious person unless you were a physician or their spouse.

Some of the panic receded. Marginally.

"Your modesty was preserved," Tianlang-Jun said, apparently reading his expression. His voice had gone gentle. "Your inner robe was never removed. We were very respectful."

The words confirmed that Tianlang-Jun understood exactly what that layer meant. That he had, at some point, made the conscious decision to stop at that boundary rather than cross it.

Somehow, that was worse than if he'd just been oblivious.

"We used a cleansing talisman," a voice said from the corner.

Shen Qingqiu's head snapped toward the sound. He hadn't noticed the figure lurking in the shadows—tall, scaled, humanoid now rather than serpentine, but unmistakably the same demon who had swallowed him.

Zhuzhi-Lang. Who was looking at the floor with an expression of profound discomfort.

"For the—after I—" He stopped. Swallowed. "...From the rescue."

"From eating me," Shen Qingqiu supplied flatly.

Zhuzhi-Lang's scales flushed darker. "...Yes."

"The outer robes were beyond saving," Tianlang-Jun continued. "Torn to shreds in places—what happened there, exactly?"

Shen Qingqiu's jaw tightened. The Little Palace Mistress and her whip. The way she'd smiled while she did it.

"The Palace Master's daughter has an iron whip," he said.

Something dark passed through Tianlang-Jun's eyes. He didn't ask further questions.

"The middle layer smelled of digestive processes," Tianlang-Jun said delicately. "So we replaced that as well. But everything beneath was left untouched. As I said, we were very respectful."

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes and counted to ten. It didn't help.

"You kidnapped me," he said.

"Zhuzhi-Lang *rescued* you," Tianlang-Jun corrected gently. "Honestly, I can't believe the cultivation world's audacity—imprisoning you just because they discovered our connection. As if love between realms was something to be punished."

"Our connection," Shen Qingqiu repeated slowly.

"Yes." Tianlang-Jun's expression had gone soft. "I know I don't remember you. The seal, the imprisonment—it damaged my memories. But the evidence is clear. We must have loved each other. Before I was sealed." His smile turned almost smug. "The cultivators found our love letters. Very compelling evidence, I'm told."

Shen Qingqiu's mind snagged on that. *Very compelling evidence, I'm told.* The phrasing. The smugness. The way he said it like someone admiring their own handiwork—

His eyes narrowed. "You forged and planted the evidence."

"The evidence was fake, yes," Tianlang-Jun agreed, nodding sagely. "But that doesn't mean the truth it pointed to wasn't real."

THAT'S NOT HOW EVIDENCE WORKS, Shen Qingqiu's brain shrieked.

"I have never met you," he huffed, barely containing his exasperation. "Not before your imprisonment. Not ever. We don't have a relationship."

Tianlang-Jun's expression didn't change. If anything, he looked more sympathetic.

"I understand this must be overwhelming. You had a qi deviation, didn't you? One that damaged your memories?" His smile turned wistful. "We're so alike, you and I. Both of us

struggling with lost pasts."

He reached out and took Shen Qingqiu's hand.

"Amnesiac star-crossed lovers," Tianlang-Jun said with wonder in his voice. "Separated by fate, reunited by circumstance, both unable to remember the love that once bound them."

"I didn't have a qi deviation that—" Shen Qingqiu stopped.

Because he *had* had something. Shen Jiu's fever. The one that had killed the original goods and let Shen Yuan take over. From the outside, it would have looked exactly like what Tianlang-Jun was describing.

"But that's not—that's different—"

"Is it?" Tianlang-Jun asked gently. "You can't remember your past clearly. Neither can I. But we both have fragments. Impressions." His eyes met Shen Qingqiu's. "And you have that hidden alcove."

Shen Qingqiu's stomach dropped through the floor.

He had just dealt with this. Literally *just*. Less than—however long he'd been unconscious—ago, Luo Binghe had been cradling his face in the water prison and demanding he admit to the fan art in his apparently not-so-secret alcove. That conversation had been interrupted by Shen Qingqiu's body staging a mutiny and then by getting swallowed by a snake.

And now it was happening *again*.

"The one my nephew Zhuzhi-Lang saw," Tianlang-Jun continued. "He reported back everything about the hidden room in your home filled with paintings and sculptures."

Shen Qingqiu distantly wondered if it was too late to ask Zhuzhi-Lang to eat him again. At least digestive processes didn't involve *this*.

Because his fan art—his secret shame, his private indulgence, his absolutely-not-meant-for-public-consumption fan art—had been the subject of demon realm intelligence. While he'd been sitting in his bamboo house, blissfully adding new pieces to his collection, a snake demon had already catalogued everything and gave detailed reports to the former demon emperor who was sealed beneath a mountain.

"Zhuzhi-Lang has an eye for detail," Tianlang-Jun added warmly. "We've discussed your technique at length, actually. The layering you use for spiritual energy effects is particularly sophisticated."

At length. They had analyzed his brushwork in a prison sealing the greatest threat to the cultivation world. Like a book club. A really horrifying book club.

"He was particularly taken with one piece," Tianlang-Jun continued, expression going soft with wonder. "A larger painting. The subject in dark robes, seated on a throne of bones. He said the use of shadow was striking."

A tiny, traitorous part of him preened. *Striking* was right. That shadow work had taken him *weeks*.

The rest of him wanted to die. Because Tianlang-Jun was looking at him like Shen Qingqiu had just confessed undying love.

"Such care," Tianlang-Jun sounded entranced. "The details aren't quite perfect—slightly off, as if recreating me from memory rather than direct observation. Which makes sense, given your qi deviation." His voice went tender. "You couldn't remember me clearly, but your hands still knew the shape of me."

Your hands still knew the shape of me.

Shen Qingqiu was going to combust.

"It's not of you," Shen Qingqiu said, slightly strangled.

Tianlang-Jun's smile didn't waver. "Of course."

"I'm serious. Those paintings aren't—"

"The heavenly demon mark," Tianlang-Jun said, ticking off on his fingers. "The throne of bones—very demon emperor, I appreciate the aesthetic. And Zhuzhi-Lang mentioned the *hair*." He touched his own dark curls with obvious satisfaction. "Long, black, luxuriously wavy. He said you captured the volume beautifully."

Shen Qingqiu had a sudden, vivid memory of Luo Binghe in the water prison, jaw tight, hand coming up to touch his own glossy waves while disparaging his father's deteriorated appearance.

The hair vanity is genetic, Shen Qingqiu thought hysterically.

"But it's really *not*—"

"You're embarrassed." Tianlang-Jun's eyes softened. "I understand. Confronted with evidence of feelings you can't remember—it must be overwhelming. We don't have to discuss it further." He patted Shen Qingqiu's hand, warm and reassuring. "Just know that I'm flattered. Truly. No one's ever paid such attention to my curls."

He looked genuinely touched. Genuinely *delighted* that someone had apparently spent years rendering his hair with loving attention to detail.

The worst part was that he wasn't even wrong about the technical skill. Shen Qingqiu *had* worked hard on those curls. He just hadn't been drawing *this man's* curls.

But what was he supposed to say? *Actually, I was drawing your son, because I read about his future in a novel before I died and woke up in this world—*

He could practically feel the System hovering, ready to smite him for even thinking about it.

There was no version of that explanation that didn't make everything worse. Or get him killed.

Shen Qingqiu drank the soup mechanically, tasting nothing.

The next morning—or what Shen Qingqiu assumed was morning; it was difficult to tell in a pocket dimension—Tianlang-Jun appeared at his bedside with more soup and a proclamation.

"You need to walk," he announced. "Lying in bed will only make the muscle weakness worse. Movement aids recovery."

Shen Qingqiu, who had been hoping to spend the day staring at the ceiling and contemplating his life choices and how thoroughly his hobby had ruined his life, did not find this news encouraging.

"I'm fine," he said.

"You're not fine. You're recovering from prolonged imprisonment, spiritual suppression, poison flare-ups, and being swallowed by a snake." Tianlang-Jun said. "I've prepared a route through the garden—gentle terrain, plenty of places to rest. Besides..." He leaned in slightly, voice dropping. "I think you'll find the garden very *interesting.*"

It should not have been possible to make the word *garden* sound seductive. And yet.

The way he said it—low, intimate, like he was sharing a secret meant only for Shen Qingqiu—did something unfortunate to Shen Qingqiu's pulse.

He's talking about a garden, Shen Qingqiu reminded himself firmly. *Plants. Flowers. There is no reason for your heart rate to increase over horticulture.*

Against his better judgment, Shen Qingqiu let Tianlang-Jun help him out of bed. His legs were weak, unsteady, but they held. Tianlang-Jun offered his arm for support with such natural grace that Shen Qingqiu found himself taking it before he could think better of it.

The arm was very solid. He could feel the muscle definition through the silk.

This was fine. This was a normal observation. Cultivators were frequently well-muscled. It would be strange *not* to notice. It didn't mean anything.

They walked slowly through the estate, Tianlang-Jun matching his pace to Shen Qingqiu's unsteady steps. He was warm. Unreasonably warm. And he smelled good—something woodsy and dark, like sandalwood and power—and Shen Qingqiu wanted to bang his head against a wall because *why was he noticing how his kidnapper smelled?*

"You're tense," Tianlang-Jun observed. His voice was mild. Amused.

"I'm being held captive. Forgive me if I'm not relaxed."

"You're being *hosted.* As a guest. A cherished one." His free hand came up to pat Shen Qingqiu's where it rested on his arm. "Lean on me more. You're still favoring your left side."

Shen Qingqiu was absolutely not going to lean on him more.

He leaned on him more.

Traitor, he thought at his own body. *Absolute traitor.*

But then—of course his body was simply reacting to support. To stability. Anyone would appreciate a steady arm when their legs were weak. This was basic survival instinct, nothing more.

And then they stepped outside, and Shen Qingqiu forgot to be annoyed.

The garden shouldn't have been possible.

Demonic plants grew alongside human realm flowers. Spiritual herbs that required completely different environments somehow thrived side by side. The arrays Shen Qingqiu could see were intricate beyond belief, woven so tightly that they created miniature pocket dimensions where normal rules didn't apply.

"This is what I've been working on," Tianlang-Jun said. There was pride in his voice. "Creating balance. Proving it's possible." He looked at Shen Qingqiu. "Isn't it beautiful?"

It was. Objectively, it was stunning. The kind of achievement that would make cultivation historians weep.

And Shen Qingqiu found himself leaning closer, studying the array patterns with something that felt uncomfortably like fascination. The way the spiritual pressure gradients had been managed—*elegant*. The solution for cross-realm plant compatibility—*ingenious*. The sheer audacity of the underlying theory—

This was the work of a genuine visionary. A madman, yes, but a brilliant madman. No wonder it had taken the combined forces of every major sect to bring him down.

Shen Qingqiu hated that he was impressed. He hated it so much.

He looked back at Tianlang-Jun. Beautiful, brilliant, and apparently responsible for all of this.

His face heated. His pulse quickened. Something behind his ribs fluttered in a way that had no business fluttering. His palms were sweating. Why were his palms sweating?

Was this—

This felt like—

No. No, this was definitely a blood sugar thing. He'd been unconscious for hours. Residual effects from being imprisoned for the last few days. That was all.

Shen Qingqiu was a scholar. He knew the difference between attraction and low blood sugar.

This was low blood sugar.

Speaking of scholarship—his brain was already cataloguing details. Already noting the innovations. Already identifying the fundamental flaws.

Because there *were* flaws. Spectacular, beautiful, absolutely fatal flaws.

His heart rate kicked up another notch. His skin felt too tight. A thrill ran down his spine that was definitely, *definitely* just the anticipation of academic debate.

Because Shen Qingqiu knew that pointing them out was going to be *so very* deeply satisfying.

"It won't work," he said.

Tianlang-Jun blinked. "Excuse me?"

"This." Shen Qingqiu gestured at the garden. "It's brilliant. But it won't work on a larger scale. You're using—what, three different types of arrays? All perfectly balanced, all constantly maintained by your demonic energy?"

"Five types, actually," Tianlang-Jun said, sounding almost defensive. "And yes, they require maintenance, but—"

"But you can't maintain arrays across an entire realm, let alone three merged into one," Shen Qingqiu interrupted. His voice had shifted, taking on the tone of someone who'd spent way too many hours arguing on internet forums. "The energy requirements alone would be astronomical. You'd burn through a Heavenly Demon's reserves in—what, a month? Two? And that's assuming you could get the arrays to synchronize across different spiritual pressure zones, which you can't, because the variables are fundamentally incompatible."

"I've accounted for—"

"Have you accounted for population density fluctuations? Seasonal qi variations? The fact that demon realm spiritual pressure operates on entirely different principles than human realm pressure?"

Tianlang-Jun opened his mouth.

"And before you say 'adaptive arrays,'" Shen Qingqiu continued, because he was on a roll now and his inner forum warrior had fully awakened, "that would require someone to maintain each node. Meaning you'd need—what, thousands of array masters? Tens of thousands? All working in perfect coordination?"

He paused for breath.

"So what's your solution? How are you planning to power arrays across three realms without burning yourself out in a month?"

Tianlang-Jun's smile widened. "Xin Mo."

Shen Qingqiu stared at him.

"The ancient demonic sword," Tianlang-Jun continued, apparently mistaking his disbelief for confusion. "It amplifies power exponentially. With it, a single wielder could theoretically maintain—"

"The sword that drives its wielders insane?" Shen Qingqiu interrupted. "That Xin Mo? Your solution to a realm-spanning infrastructure project is a weapon that slowly destroys the mind of anyone who uses it?"

He'd found his rhythm now, voice dripping with the kind of pedantic condescension that had made him infamous on Zhongdian Literature forums.

"Xin Mo doesn't create energy, it *consumes* it. From the wielder. From the environment. From the very fabric of reality if you push it hard enough. Using it to power a realm-spanning array would be like trying to fill a lake by drilling a hole in the bottom and setting the surrounding forest on fire while expecting the smoke to condense into water. The physics don't even pretend to work."

Tianlang-Jun was silent for a long moment.

Then he started laughing.

It wasn't cruel laughter or mocking laughter. It sounded almost... joyful?

"Oh," Tianlang-Jun said. "Oh, I understand now."

"Understand what?"

"Why I loved you," Tianlang-Jun said simply. "You're brilliant. Critical. You see the flaws in my work and you're not afraid to point them out. Do you know how rare that is? How many people just nodded and agreed with everything I said because I was a demon emperor?"

"I wasn't—" Shen Qingqiu sputtered. "I wasn't *flirting* with you! I was telling you your plan is fundamentally flawed!"

"Yes." Tianlang-Jun's smile was radiant. "*Exactly.*"

"That's not—that shouldn't be—" Shen Qingqiu struggled for words. "Normal people don't find criticism attractive!"

Tianlang-Jun's voice dropped, low and warm, and his eyes—those devastating eyes—held Shen Qingqiu's gaze with an intensity that made his breath catch. "You have no idea how *refreshing* you are."

Then he leaned closer. Close enough that Shen Qingqiu could smell sandalwood and something darker underneath. Close enough that he could see the individual silver strands threading through ink-black hair. Close enough that if either of them swayed forward—

"Honestly," Tianlang-Jun murmured, his breath ghosting warm against Shen Qingqiu's lips, "it's the most *stimulating* conversation I've had in decades."

Shen Qingqiu forgot how to breathe.

His entire body went hot. His knees—his knees actually went *weak*, what was he, a maiden in a romance novel? His heart was slamming against his ribs so hard Tianlang-Jun could probably hear it. Every nerve ending he possessed had apparently migrated to the exact places where they were almost touching but weren't.

He took a step back. Nearly stumbled. His face was burning. His ears were burning. There was a distinct possibility his entire body was burning.

It was—

This was—

This was entirely Airplane's fault.

It had absolutely nothing to do with Shen Qingqiu specifically and everything to do with the fact that Airplane had apparently decided to give his demon emperor the same devastating good looks he'd passed down to his protagonist son.

Obviously. Airplane's fault. For writing such an attractive villain.

Tianlang-Jun tilted his head, studying him with those sharp, knowing eyes. The seductive warmth hadn't left his expression, but something else had crept in underneath. Something assessing.

"You speak about these concepts as you understand them intimately," Tianlang-Jun continued. "Like you've spent years thinking about them. Like you know exactly what will happen."

Every inappropriate thought in Shen Qingqiu's head evaporated instantly.

He went very still.

Oh fuck—

"I knew someone else who spoke like that," Tianlang-Jun continued, his voice going distant. "Who talked about the world as if they'd read the script ahead of time. Su Xiyan. She had the strangest perspectives sometimes. Like she could see the future."

His expression flickered—loss, confusion, the frustration of reaching for memories that wouldn't come.

"She was a Seer too."

Too.

He thought Shen Qingqiu was a Seer.

【SYSTEM: User's transmigrator meta-knowledge has been attributed to prophetic abilities!】
【SYSTEM: No violations detected!】

Shen Qingqiu could have wept with relief. Because *Seer* was a real thing in this world. Rare, yes. Mysterious, certainly. But real. Not "I'm actually from another dimension where your entire existence is a trashy web novel" levels of impossible to explain.

"I'm not a Seer," he said, because apparently his mouth hated him.

Tianlang-Jun's smile didn't waver. "That's what she said too. She preferred 'pattern recognition' or 'logical extrapolation.'"

"Fine." Shen Qingqiu gave up. "Pattern recognition. Whatever."

Tianlang-Jun beamed like Shen Qingqiu had handed him the moon.

Why is he like this, Shen Qingqiu thought tiredly.

"Tell me more," Tianlang-Jun said, gesturing at the garden. "About what you see. About what will fail. I want to hear all of it."

Shen Qingqiu sighed.

"The secondary array network," he said, because at this point, what did it matter. "You'd need at least three failsafe layers to account for cascade failures..."

Tianlang-Jun leaned forward, closing in on the distance Shen Qingqiu had just created. His eyes were bright, intent, fixed on Shen Qingqiu like he was something rare and precious. His lips had parted slightly. He looked like a man watching the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

All because Shen Qingqiu was criticizing his arrays.

What was *wrong* with this man?

Shen Qingqiu's stomach did something complicated.

Indigestion, he told himself firmly. *Still indigestion.*

"Go on," Tianlang-Jun said, voice warm with encouragement. "What else?"

I am explaining why his plan won't work, Shen Qingqiu reminded himself. *This is not flirting. This is criticism. Stop looking at me like that.*

But Tianlang-Jun just kept watching him with those warm crimson eyes, drinking in every word. Attentive. Engaged. Hanging on every syllable like Shen Qingqiu was the most fascinating thing he'd encountered.

And Shen Qingqiu kept talking.

Because what else was he going to do?

Chapter End Notes

LBH: "My father's hair is terrible now, not like MINE" *touches own glossy perfect waves*
TLJ: "You captured my luxurious curls beautifully, no one's ever paid such attention to them"
SQQ, internally: I WAS DRAWING THE SAME HAIR. IT'S GENETIC. YOU BOTH HAVE THE SAME HAIR AND YOU'RE BOTH VAIN ABOUT IT.

TLJ: says "garden" seductively
SQQ: *swoons*

SQQ: your plan is fundamentally flawed
TLJ: 😍
SQQ: the physics don't even pretend to work
TLJ: 😍😍😍
SQQ: I'M NOT FLIRTING WITH YOU

【SYSTEM: User's critical analysis skills have been weaponized for romance!】
【SYSTEM: Achievement Unlocked: Seduced By LOGIC】

Chapter 15: Practical Applications of Bad Worldbuilding

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all so much for the love on this story! I'm so happy to hear people are enjoying my take on TLJ. Honestly, I didn't plan for him to be this charming? So now I'm seriously considering writing an alternate Silver Fox Route ending because this man has stolen my heart and he deserves nice things.
>
> Okay, dear readers, here's where I need you to really suspend your disbelief: all the array theory and mechanics—the Sound-Resonance Flowers, the imperial frequencies, the dormant mirror arrays, the dimensional triangulation—are exactly as made up as Airplane's original worldbuilding. Which is to say, completely. I needed SQQ to contact SQH, and I needed SQH to be able to get coordinates, so I invented some cultivation nonsense to make it happen. Please do not ask me how any of this works. If SQQ were reading this fic, he'd write a 3,000-word takedown.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Qingqiu had been a prisoner for nearly a week.

This was, objectively, a problem. He was trapped in a pocket dimension with a demon emperor who believed they were long-lost lovers, cut off from the outside world, with no way to contact anyone and no clear path to escape. His situation was dire. Precarious. The kind of thing that should have kept him up at night, pacing the floors and desperately plotting his way out.

Instead, Shen Qingqiu had slept better in the last few days than he had in months.

The bed was unreasonably comfortable. The silk sheets had a thread count that probably required its own cultivation technique to achieve. The room temperature stayed perfectly regulated through some kind of array work that Shen Qingqiu didn't fully understand but deeply appreciated.

It was, frankly, embarrassing how relaxing captivity had turned out to be.

And Tianlang-Jun, for all his delusions about their supposed romantic history, made Shen Qingqiu feel... safe? There was no threat of violence, no political maneuvering, no hidden agendas he had to decode. Just tea at reasonable hours, debates about array theory, and genuine delight whenever Shen Qingqiu disagreed with him.

This is Stockholm syndrome, Shen Qingqiu told himself firmly, staring up at the painted ceiling of his luxurious prison. *You're developing inappropriate attachment to your captor because he makes good tea and doesn't try to stab you. This is a known psychological phenomenon. Get it together.*

The strangest part wasn't even the debates Shen Qingqiu won. It was the ones he *lost*.

Yesterday, he'd been absolutely certain about a flaw in Tianlang-Jun's energy circulation model—had laid out his reasoning with the confident precision of someone who'd won a thousand forum arguments. But he'd been *wrong*. Demonstrably, provably wrong.

He'd braced himself for the condescending “well, actually” and expected a smug correction. Maybe even a slow, patient explanation delivered with maximum "I'm being so generous by educating you" energy. Shen Qingqiu knew the script. He'd *written* that script, back in his forum days.

Instead, Tianlang-Jun had looked at him like he'd unearthed something precious.

"You built an entire logical framework from a false premise, and it was *beautiful*. Flawed, yes, but the architecture of your reasoning—I almost wish you'd been right. It would have been so elegant," He'd leaned closer then, close enough that Shen Qingqiu could see the genuine fascination in his eyes."Walk me through it again," Tianlang-Jun had said softly. "I want to understand where your intuition diverged from the math. I want to see how you *think*."

No one had ever made being wrong feel like *winning* before.

Tianlang-Jun’s smile had done something unfortunate to Shen Qingqiu's chest. He had blamed it on the altitude. Then remembered they were in a pocket dimension and altitude was irrelevant. Then blamed it on residual poison effects. Then blamed it on Airplane. Somehow, this was definitely his fault.

Besides, it wasn't like the smile meant anything. The man had been sealed in isolation for decades. Of course he was starved for intellectual conversation. Of course he lit up whenever someone engaged with his ideas instead of cowering in fear. Shen Qingqiu just happened to be there. Convenient. Available. The intellectual equivalent of a stray cat wandering into someone's lonely garden.

Garden.

Now he was hearing it in Tianlang-Jun's voice, all low and warm and—

Nope.

Shen Qingqiu was not going to feel sympathy for his kidnapper. Or... whatever else that fluttery thing in his chest was.

He was *not*.

...the way Tianlang-Jun's eyes crinkled when he smiled was not endearing. It was just. A thing that happened. On his face.

...and the tea really had been very good.

STOP IT, he told himself, sitting up abruptly. *You are being held captive. Your reputation is in shambles. And you're lying here thinking about TEA?*

And smiles. And eye crinkles.

Shen Qingqiu pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes.

Focus! This is not a vacation.

Except... it kind of was?

No disciples bursting in with emergencies. No paperwork requiring him to decipher Ming Fan's increasingly creative excuses for losing sect resources.

No "Sect Leader, this could have been an email" meetings that dragged on for four hours about supply routes and whose disciples had trespassed on whose peak *this* time.

No having to pretend not to notice Yue Qingyuan staring at him with the weight of an entire whatever it was he had going with the original goods.

No maintaining the Shen Qingqiu façade for sixteen hours a day until his face ached from keeping his expression appropriately serene.

No System notifications. No point deductions. No sudden plot events requiring him to sacrifice his dignity. No anxiety-inducing progress bars.

No Luo Binghe.

The thought surfaced before he could stop it, and with it came the thing he'd been carefully not processing.

So. Luo Binghe didn't want to kill him.

Great. Fantastic. Shen Qingqiu had spent years preparing for the murder ending, but sure, survival was good. He could work with survival.

What he could not work with was the *kissing*.

Kissing his former teacher? His male former teacher? The man who'd pushed him into an abyss? *Why?*

Because if Binghe didn't want to kill him, and had instead chosen to kiss him while Shen Qingqiu was imprisoned, restrained, and utterly incapable of mounting any kind of response —then what the fuck *did* he want? What was the goal here? What was Shen Qingqiu supposed to *do* with that information?

Why did some traitorous part of Shen Qingqiu keep circling back to the moment Binghe had appeared in that prison? Three years in the Abyss had carved away the soft-cheeked disciple he remembered and replaced him with—

Well.

That.

He'd read about the glow-up. Airplane had spent countless paragraphs on shoulders and cheekbones and jawlines—the same details Shen Qingqiu had later obsessively rendered in paint and clay. Reading about it was one thing. Making art was another. But having the living, breathing reality of it standing in front of you was so—

Having *him* looking at you like that was so—

So.

That wasn't the point.

The point was that he'd been braced for the blackened protagonist. For cold fury and cruel smiles and the violent vengeance he'd spent years preparing to receive.

And had not been braced for Binghe to look at him like *that*. Like Shen Qingqiu was water in a desert. Like he was something precious and fragile and desperately wanted. He had not been braced for gentle hands cradling his face, or the hitch in Binghe's breath, or the raw ache in his voice.

And why—*why*—did his chest do something complicated every time he remembered Binghe's forehead pressed against his, breath warm on his lips. *I've always loved you. Even when I wanted to hate you. It's always been you, Shizun. Always. Only.*

The problem was that every time he replayed those words, his thoughts kept going. Kept sliding toward something terrifying. Toward the warmth of Binghe's mouth and the question of what might have happened if Shen Qingqiu had kissed him *back*, and that was—

Shen Qingqiu's brain executed a perfect emergency stop, like a cart whose horse had spotted a cliff edge.

Nope. Not thinking about that. Absolutely not.

He was not doing this. He was not going to lie here in his luxurious kidnapping bed and examine why his heart rate spiked every time he remembered Binghe's face. He had been successfully not thinking about this for days, and he was going to keep not thinking about it for as long as physically possible.

And if some tiny, cowardly part of him was almost grateful to be trapped in a pocket dimension right now—well. That was understandable, wasn't it?

Not escaping meant not facing Luo Binghe. Not facing his devastating mouth. Not having to figure out what to do about *always* and *only* and the raw ache in his voice.

Not having to examine whatever was happening in Shen Qingqiu's own chest.

That was fine. That was a completely normal response to an abnormal situation. Shen Qingqiu was simply being *strategic*.

...Okay, so maybe he should come up with an *actual* strategy at some point.

There had to be an escape plan somewhere in his head. Something that didn't involve returning to face Luo Binghe's earnest eyes and gentle hands and questions Shen Qingqiu had no idea how to answer. Something that didn't involve admitting he'd been enjoying his own kidnapping like some kind of disaster.

...He'd think of something. Eventually.

Tomorrow after breakfast, maybe. Tianlang-Jun made really good congee.

...Was *that* genetic?

Fuck.

Okay. Okay, *fine*. He would think about escape now, before he lost any more brain cells to this family's ridiculous bone structure.

He needed to contact someone—anyone—who could help him get out of here before Tianlang-Jun's romantic delusions escalated or Luo Binghe tracked him down and Shen Qingqiu had to have an actual *conversation* about what happened in that prison.

The problem was that Tianlang-Jun's security was genuinely impressive. The estate existed in a pocket dimension with seventeen layers of spatial distortion. The arrays were designed by someone who had clearly spent decades perfecting the art of "nobody gets in or out without my permission." And Shen Qingqiu's cultivation was compromised by Without a Cure, which meant any attempt to brute-force his way through the defenses would probably kill him before it killed the arrays.

He needed to be clever about this.

He needed to think like a transmigrator.

What resources do I have? he asked himself, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. *What do I know that Tianlang-Jun doesn't expect me to know?*

First: the estate had to connect to the outside world somehow. Zhuzhi-Lang had come and gone. Supplies appeared regularly. There were anchor points, doorways that could be opened with the right keys. But those would be heavily guarded and monitored—Tianlang-Jun might be treating him like an honored guest, but he wasn't stupid enough to leave the exits unguarded.

Second: communication arrays. Every powerful cultivator had them. Tianlang-Jun had been an emperor with a vast network of generals and spies. He would have needed ways to send and receive messages even in his most private spaces. Those arrays might be dormant now—decades of disuse would do that—but the infrastructure would still be there, built into the walls and mirrors and furniture.

Shen Qingqiu's gaze drifted to the ornate mirror on the wall.

Mirrors in xianxia cultivation weren't just reflective surfaces. They were tools. Arrays could be inscribed on the back, hidden by the silver coating. And a mirror in a demon emperor's private chambers would *definitely* have arrays.

But even if he could find a dormant communication array, he'd need spiritual energy to activate it. And his spiritual energy was currently trying to kill him courtesy of Without a Cure. Any significant channeling would likely trigger a flare-up that could leave him unconscious—or worse—before he finished sending a message.

Unless...

He thought about the gardens. About Tianlang-Jun's enthusiastic tours, pointing out hybrid after hybrid with the pride of a man showing off his life's work. About the Sound-Resonance Flowers growing near the eastern pavilion—the ones that absorbed spiritual energy and broadcast it as harmonic frequencies.

The ones Shen Qingqiu had pocketed a bloom from yesterday because his survival instincts had screamed *take anything that might be useful*.

He pulled the flower from his sleeve. It was wilting now, petals drooping, but still alive. Still humming faintly with absorbed spiritual essence. Sound-Resonance Flowers were mentioned in chapter 312—they were a key component in long-distance communication arrays because they could amplify and transmit frequencies across vast distances.

If he could pair the flower's stored energy with a dormant mirror array, he might be able to send a signal without using his own spiritual energy at all.

But send it where? And on what frequency?

The old command center. Tianlang-Jun's arrays would have been linked to his central hub of operations. And if Luo Binghe had taken over his father's territories, that command center would now be under his control. Shang Qinghua would be there—had to be there—probably frantically searching through Tianlang-Jun's old records trying to find this estate.

If I broadcast a signal, Shen Qingqiu thought, *and if Airplane is monitoring frequencies trying to locate me...*

But which frequency? Communication arrays operated on specific harmonic patterns. Broadcasting randomly would be like shouting into the void—the signal would scatter across dimensions without ever reaching anyone who could hear it.

He needed to broadcast on a frequency that Shang Qinghua would actually be monitoring.

And then it hit him.

Chapter 347.

The chapter everyone skipped. Forty pages of dense, tedious explanation about how the demon realm's communication network operated—the harmonic frequencies, the relay points, the emergency broadcast protocols. Airplane had shoved it in right before a highly anticipated papapa scene, and the comments had been *brutal*. Readers complaining about being blue-balled by worldbuilding. Demands that he "get to the good stuff already." Threats to drop the novel entirely if he ever pulled that shit again.

Shen Yuan had not skipped it.

Shen Yuan had read every excruciating word, taken notes, and then written a 3,000-word forum post titled "Chapter 347: A Masterclass in How NOT to Do Exposition" that had dissected every logical inconsistency, every contradiction with previously established mechanics, every instance where Airplane had clearly made things up on the spot to justify plot convenience.

It had been one of his most popular posts. Other readers had added their own complaints in the comments. Someone had made a drinking game out of the plot holes.

And buried in all that tedious worldbuilding—mentioned exactly once, in a throwaway line about "emergency frequencies reserved for imperial communications"—was a specific harmonic pattern. The frequency that Tianlang-Jun's personal arrays would have operated on. The one that would cut through interference and reach any array linked to the old imperial network.

If Shang Qinghua was smart—and he was, underneath all the cowardice and sycophancy—he'd be monitoring that frequency. He'd written it, after all. He'd know it was the most likely channel for any communication from or about Tianlang-Jun.

Please be paying attention to your own terrible worldbuilding, Shen Qingqiu thought grimly.

He approached the mirror.

Up close, he could see it—the faint shimmer along the frame that indicated array work. Dormant, yes. Decades of disuse had let the spiritual energy drain away. But the structure was intact. The pathways were still there, waiting to be activated.

Shen Qingqiu pressed his palm flat against the glass.

Nothing happened. Of course nothing happened—there was no energy to power the array.

He pressed the Sound-Resonance Flower to the mirror's back.

It pulsed. The array flickered to life. Shen Qingqiu focused on the frequency from Chapter 347 and pushed.

He hoped someone was listening.

The mirror flashed.

Then—

Silence.

Shen Qingqiu waited, heart pounding. Had it worked? Had the signal reached anyone? Or had he just wasted his one chance on a desperate gamble that—

"—still nothing on the secondary frequencies, maybe if we tried—"

Shang Qinghua's voice. Tinny and distant, crackling through the mirror like a bad phone connection, but unmistakably *him*.

"AIRPLANE!" Shen Qingqiu hissed.

The voice cut off. A clatter. Something that sounded like a body hitting a desk.

"...Cucumber-bro?!"

"No, it's your other transmigrator acquaintance trapped in a pocket dimension. Yes, it's me."

"How are you—is this the imperial frequency? From chapter three-forty-seven?"

"The one you buried in forty pages of exposition right before a papapa scene? Yes."

"You actually *read* that?!"

"I wrote a three-thousand-word takedown of it. I know your worldbuilding better than you do." Shen Qingqiu pressed closer to the mirror. "I used a Sound-Resonance Flower to power a dormant array. The energy's already fading—we don't have long."

"Wait, you're broadcasting from *inside* the pocket dimension?" Scrambling sounds. Papers crashing. "If I can trace the signal before it dies—MY KING! I NEED YOUR ICE ARRAYS TO STABILIZE THE CONNECTION!”

Mobei-Jun's cold voice in the background, sounding deeply unenthused.

"Don't say it," Shang Qinghua warned.

"I wasn't going to."

"You were *about* to 'your king' me, I could *hear* it—and you know what? Bro, I don't have to take this from the guy who got kidnapped because he couldn't stop making thirst art of the protagonist—"

Shen Qingqiu's entire body went rigid. "Who told you about that?"

"Who do you think?" A manic laugh. "Luo Binghe showed up at the command center ranting about how his father kidnapped you because of your secret love affair. He described your fan art collection in *excruciating* detail. The sculptures. The paintings. He said something like, 'Whoever made these studied their subject obsessively.' Direct quote, bro."

Shen Qingqiu felt his face heat. His ears were probably red.

"That was *private*."

"Yeah, well, it's not anymore! Luo Binghe found it and has been torturing himself with it ever since!" Another crash in the background. "He looked at fan art of his own face and actually decided they must be of Tianlang-Jun. Then he stormed off to confront his dad about it. Bro. He went to yell at Tianlang-Jun about why he *abandoned* you."

"Oh no."

"He gift-wrapped you! 'Hey dad, here's everything you need to know about your secret lover!'" Shang Qinghua's voice was climbing.

"And then he confronted *me* about it. Accused me of being in love with his father." Shen Qingqiu's voice went tight. "I tried to explain, but my poison flared before I could finish. He didn't believe me."

"Of course he didn't. He literally created his own rival. He made up a guy to be jealous of and the guy was *him*. I can't."

"This is your fault. If you'd given him literally any capacity for self-recognition—"

"Oh, so NOW my writing is the problem? When it's convenient for you?"

"Your writing has *always* been the problem! That's been my consistent position from the beginning!"

"You made SCULPTURES, Cucumber-bro! Don't talk to me about problems!"

"It was a HOBBY!"

Shang Qinghua didn't say anything. The silence was deeply judgmental.

"...okay." Shang Qinghua audibly tried to collect himself. "Okay. Putting a pin in your 'hobby.' What's the situation there? What does Tianlang-Jun actually want?"

"He thinks we were lovers before he was sealed. That I've been pining for him for years. And that I lost my memories in a qi deviation. So even if I don't remember our 'great romance,' he's very understanding about it. Says he's happy to wait. For me to remember, or just..." His voice softened without meaning to. "Fall in love with him again."

"That's... weirdly sweet? In a delusional kidnapper way?"

Shen Qingqiu made a frustrated sound. "It would be easier to hate if he weren't so—" He cut himself off.

"So what?"

"Nothing."

"Cucumber-bro. So *what*."

"...this is your fault."

"What did I do NOW?"

"Why did you make him like this, Airplane."

"Like *what*?"

"His arrays are brilliant. His pocket dimension is ingenious. And his face—that bone structure is clearly genetic."

A pause. Then, delighted: "Cucumber-bro. Is the former demon emperor *hot*?"

"I didn't say that."

"You absolutely said that."

"That's not—I was making an observation—"

"Cucumber-bro." Shang Qinghua's voice was trembling with glee. "You think Tianlang-Jun is a sexy genius."

"I think he's a *problem*."

"You're being held captive and you're worried about how HOT your kidnapper is!"

"I am NOT worried about—can we move on?!"

"I'm never letting this go. Never. This is the best day of my life."

"AIRPLANE."

"Fine, fine." He was clearly still grinning. "But wait—back up. He thinks you qi deviated and lost your memories?"

"Yes."

"Cucumber-bro. You *did* qi deviate. The original goods qi deviated and died and you woke up in his body. So Tianlang-Jun is technically *right* about why you don't remember anything—he's just wrong about *what* you forgot."

"Yes. I'm aware of the irony."

"This is *incredible*—"

"Airplane. Focus."

"Right, right." More crashing. "Who else knows about the art?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me." Shen Qingqiu's voice was stiff. He was definitely still blushing. He hated everything about this.

"Just the immediate disaster radius. You, me, Luo Binghe. Mobei-Jun was in the room when Luo Binghe had his breakdown. A few demon generals too, but most of them fled pretty early once Luo Binghe started crackling with murderous energy."

"Small mercies."

"Yeah, about that." Shang Qinghua's voice went careful in a way that made Shen Qingqiu's stomach drop. "The cultivation world doesn't know about the art specifically. But they're losing their minds over... other things."

"What other things."

“Remember the fake evidence? The stuff about you colluding with demons?"

Shen Qingqiu's stomach sank further. "The meeting records. The intelligence reports. The love letters." He paused. "Please tell me this isn't about the love letters."

"The love letters are now circulating through every major sect."

"...what."

"Copies, bro. Someone made copies."

"*Copies?!*"

"Proof of your non-existent torrid secret romance is being passed around like trashy fiction."

"Who would—why would anyone—" Shen Qingqiu took a breath. "How bad are they?"

“There's a line about your 'jade-like countenance inflaming his eternal demonic passions.'"

Shen Qingqiu put his face in his hands.

"I heard someone did a dramatic reading at a night hunt. Apparently, it's becoming a *thing*."

"And by the way, Luo Binghe publicly declared that he ‘wants you.’"

"Oh no."

"Oh YES. So between the demon love letters and the protagonist staking his claim? There are factions now, bro. The 'demonic seduction conspiracy' faction. The 'Shen Qingqiu is just incredibly slutty' faction."

"*Slutty?!*"

"The 'Shen Qingqiu somehow seduced BOTH a demon lord AND his former student' faction. They overlap with the slutty faction, actually. The forbidden teacher-student thing really adds spice, apparently. People are *feral* for it."

"Why are you enjoying this."

"And there's actually another faction that thinks it's all very romantic and tragic. They're calling you the 'Demon's Beloved.'" Shang Qinghua paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was trembling with barely suppressed glee. "Bro. They're writing *stories*."

"...Stories."

"About you. And your mysterious demon lover. AND Luo Binghe. There's a love triangle narrative taking hold."

"I'm not hearing this."

"There's one where you end up with *both*!"

"You know what, I'm just going to stay here. I'm never leaving this pocket dimension."

"Bro—"

"Tianlang-Jun makes good tea. I'll be fine."

"Some of them are *illustrated*, bro." Shang Qinghua sounded almost reverent. "You have RPF now. Just like the one Luo Binghe made up in his head, except now everyone else is writing it too."

Shen Qingqiu opened his mouth. Closed it.

He thought about his own hidden alcove full of Luo Binghe artwork. He thought about all those years on the forums, mocking Airplane's plot and character choices while simultaneously consuming every piece of fan content he could find.

The universe wasn't just mocking him. The universe had written a callout post.

"The audacity," he said anyway.

"Bro. You started this. You're the original content creator here."

Shen Qingqiu started laughing and found he couldn't stop.

"I got kidnapped over *fan art*," he wheezed. "Airplane. I got *kidnapped*. Because the former demon emperor thinks my fan art is proof of my undying love. I'm living in one of your stupid plot devices!"

Silence.

"Wait." Shang Qinghua's voice had gone sharp. "Wait wait wait. Tianlang-Jun *also* knows about your thirst art?"

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes. He'd said too much.

"Hold on. Hold ON. Luo Binghe looked at it and thought 'that's my dad.' And then Tianlang-Jun looked at it and thought 'that's me.' THE SAME ART?!"

"He hasn't *seen* it! Zhuzhi-Lang just... described it to him."

"DESCRIBED it—like WHAT? 'Uncle, you should see how lovingly he rendered your cheekbones'?!"

"Actually, it was the hair."

"...what."

"Tianlang-Jun was very impressed with my rendering of his hair. Said no one had ever paid such attention to his curls."

"His *curls*."

"He touched them while he said it. Very pleased with himself."

"*No.*"

"Luo Binghe actually did the same thing in the water prison. Touched his own hair while telling me his father's had gone stringy and thin."

"*Seriously*?"

"The hair vanity is *genetic*, Airplane."

The connection hissed and popped. Shang Qinghua's voice went distant for a moment, like he was speaking through water.

"I can't—this is—" More choking sounds.

"The signal is fading, Airplane."

A long pause. Then, quieter, almost plaintive: "...you could have picked any other hobby. Calligraphy. Poetry. Literally anything."

"I will accept this criticism at a later date."

"Guqin! You already play guqin! Why wasn't that enough!"

The mirror flickered—no, the *sound* flickered, Shang Qinghua's voice stretching thin like taffy before snapping back.

"Airplane. We don't have time."

"Right. Right."

Scrambling sounds. The crackle of spiritual energy being redirected. When Shang Qinghua spoke again, his voice was steadier—he must have done something to stabilize the connection.

"And bro?" A pause. "Luo Binghe's here. He's been basically living in the command center since you were kidnapped. The second I get coordinates, he's coming for you."

Something complicated moved through Shen Qingqiu's chest. He thought about warm hands and desperate kisses and questions he still didn't know how to answer.

"Tell him I'm safe," he said quietly. Then, before he could stop himself: "Tell him I'm waiting for him to find me."

The signal was dying.

"Get the coordinates," Shen Qingqiu said. "I can't be here if someone comes."

He stepped back from the mirror. The Sound-Resonance Flower behind it still pulsed weakly and he hoped it would be enough.

He just had to wait.

Binghe would come for him.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: I need to escape
SQQ: But I haven't processed the LBH thing
SQQ: And TLJ makes really good tea
SQQ: And the bed is really comfortable
SQQ: And no one here makes me do paperwork
SQQ: I'll escape tomorrow

SQQ: Why is my kidnapper hot? Asking for strategic reasons.
SQH: THERE ARE FACTIONS. SOMEONE STARTED A POLL.
SQH. I'm tracking all of them. For strategic reasons.
SQQ: Binghe and Tianlang-Jun did the exact same hair touch!
SQH: NO. Seriously?!
SQQ: THE HAIR VANITY IS GENETIC!
[signal starts degrading]
SQH: Oh shit we should probably—
SQQ: Escape plan. Right. Yes.

The signal is fading. They have limited time. Do they focus on the escape plan?
No. They gossip about TLJ's forged love letters and how the hair vanity is genetic.
Priorities.

Chapter 16: Through The Scrying Glass

Chapter Notes

Your comments on SQQ and SQH finally catching up to compare notes about all this madness were life-giving and absolute gold! Thank you for laughing with me—that last chapter was Peak Comedy™ and now we're entering the "actually fix this mess" portion of our program.

Also, I'm still in awe of how many people liked the TLJ/SQQ dynamic?? Some of you said you went looking for more of this rare pair afterward and honestly, if I've inspired anyone—please take this and run with it! More TLJ/SQQ content in the world? Yes please.

Good news: The TLJ alternate ending will happen! No second male lead suffering on my watch. I've made this a series, so please subscribe if you want it! It'll branch off as if the last chapter never happened—like, what if SQQ never made contact with SQH and just decided to stay kidnapped?

Bad news: My vacation's over. 😔 Updates will slow down from "almost daily" to "whenever my real life allows." BUT—I've only got two more chapters drafted, so we're in the home stretch. No eternal WIP here, I promise!

Can't say exactly when the next chapters will be up, but they ARE written.

Thank you again for all the kudos and comments! Hearing that I made you laugh or smile makes me smile every time—and some of your comments have thrown me into fits of giggles. It's the best thing ever. (◕‿◕✿)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shang Qinghua's hands flew across the formation stones, adjusting talismans and redirecting spiritual energy as sweat beaded on his forehead. The signal from the Sound-Resonance Flower was already degrading—he could feel it weakening, the connection thinning like a thread about to snap.

"Come on, come on, come on," he muttered, adjusting variables with frantic speed. The spatial coordinates kept almost resolving before scattering again. "Just give me something to work with—"

"Report."

Shang Qinghua nearly jumped out of his skin.

Luo Binghe stood in the doorway, and he looked—

Wrecked, Shang Qinghua's brain supplied. *He looks like he hasn't slept in days, which he hasn't, and also like he might murder someone, which he might.*

The new demon emperor's robes were travel-stained, his hair slightly disheveled. Xin Mo hung at his hip, pulsing with restless dark energy. But it was his eyes that made Shang Qinghua's survival instincts scream—red-rimmed, hollow, with the barely-leashed intensity of someone operating on nothing but desperation and rage.

Mobei-Jun followed a step behind, ice-blue eyes scanning the room before settling in the shadows near the door. Silent. Watchful.

"Junshang." Shang Qinghua tried to keep his voice steady. "I—I established contact. With Shen Qingqiu. Through the old imperial frequency."

Luo Binghe went completely still.

"He's alive. He's unharmed. The signal came from inside the pocket dimension—I'm working on tracing the coordinates now, but the flower's energy is fading faster than I calculated. I have maybe ten minutes before—"

"You spoke to him?" Luo Binghe crossed the room quickly and suddenly he was right there, looming over Shang Qinghua's workspace with an intensity that made the air feel thin. "When? What did he say? Is he—"

"A few minutes ago. While you were—" Shang Qinghua hesitated.

He'd sent a messenger to find Luo Binghe the moment the connection stabilized, but the demon lord hadn't been in his quarters or the war room or any of the places a reasonable person might wait for news. He'd been—

Well. Shang Qinghua had a pretty good guess where he'd been.

Luo Binghe's jaw tightened, something flickering in his expression. He didn't offer an explanation, and Shang Qinghua didn't ask for one.

But he could see the faint traces of spiritual residue on Luo Binghe's robes. The kind that came from portal travel. The kind that might cling to someone who had just returned from, say, a certain bamboo house on Qing Jing Peak. A certain hidden alcove.

He went back, Shang Qinghua realized. *To torture himself with it.*

Luo Binghe, unable to sit still, unable to wait, was cycling between the command center and the source of his misery.

"He's safe," Shang Qinghua said, answering the question that was still hanging in the air. He paused, then added more quietly: "He said to tell you he's waiting for you."

His expression cracked. Just for a moment. Then it was gone, smoothed over by that terrible blankness.

"I'm trying to layer a scrying formation over the existing connection to amplify the signal." Shang Qinghua's hands traced rapid patterns through the air and channeled another thread of spiritual energy into the flickering matrices. "If I can stabilize the resonance, we might be able to see what's happening while I triangulate the dimensional coordinates—"

"Do it." Luo Binghe's voice was hoarse. "Whatever you need. Just find him."

He moved to the center of the room, hand resting on Xin Mo's hilt, and went still in that particular way that meant he was holding himself together through sheer force of will.

The sword was singing—a low, resonant hum that made Shang Qinghua's teeth ache. Dark energy leaked from the blade in wisps of black smoke, curling around Luo Binghe's feet, spreading across the floor.

Where it touched the stone, small fissures formed from the sheer pressure. The weight of demonic qi so concentrated that it was warping physical reality.

Shang Qinghua turned back to his calculations and tried not to think about what would happen if the coordinates didn't resolve in time.

The main projection array flickered.

"The scrying formation is holding!" he exclaimed. "Junshang—"

The image formed.

A bedroom. Luxurious in the way of old power—silk hangings, carved furniture, a massive bed with a frame inlaid with gold and precious stones, piled with cushions and draped in shimmering fabric that seemed to shift colors in the light.

Shang Qinghua squinted. Was that—was that *Moonfire Silk*? The legendary fabric woven from threads secreted by the Eclipse Moths of the Southern Reaches, which he'd described Luo Binghe obtaining after slaying their queen in chapter 287? The stuff he'd written was "softer than clouds and perfectly temperature-regulating"?

He'd made that up because he needed a luxury reward item and "nice fabric" sounded boring. But damn if Tianlang-Jun didn't have *taste*.

And there, reclining against the pillows, was Shen Qingqiu.

He looked…fine? More than fine, actually. Relaxed. Healthy. His hair was loose over his shoulders, his color was good, and he was wearing ornate robes in black and red silk that were clearly too broad in the shoulders and too long in the sleeves.

Luo Binghe's breath punched out of him like he'd been stabbed.

Tianlang-Jun's robes. Shen Qingqiu was wearing Tianlang-Jun's robes.

On the projection, Shen Qingqiu stirred, setting aside a scroll he'd been reading. He rose from the bed with the careful movements of someone still recovering, and made his way to sit at a

small table by the window.

The door opened. Tianlang-Jun entered carrying a tea tray—and a stack of array diagrams tucked under one arm.

Shang Qinghua blinked.

He hadn't... he hadn't written Tianlang-Jun to look like *that*.

He'd barely written much about him at all, actually. Three lines, maybe. "Demon emperor, sealed, Binghe's dad, hot." Wait, had he written hot? He couldn't remember. The System had clearly taken some creative liberties.

Tianlang-Jun moved like a force of nature wearing human skin. Tall, broad-shouldered, silver-streaked hair cascading over shoulders that could probably bench-press a small mountain. Warm crimson eyes, a smile that promised trouble, and cheekbones the System had absolutely no right to render that well. The kind of presence that made rooms feel smaller. And he was looking at Shen Qingqiu like the peak lord had personally invented sunlight.

Okay. Okay, yeah. He could see why Cucumber-bro was having problems.

Tianlang-Jun set down the tea, then spread the diagrams across the table. Instead of taking the seat across from Shen Qingqiu, he moved to stand behind him, one hand coming to rest on the back of his chair as he leaned down to point at something on the paper.

Close. Too close. His mouth near Shen Qingqiu's ear.

"What do you think of this formation?"

Shen Qingqiu frowned at the diagram, apparently unbothered by his kidnapper just hovering over his shoulder. "The anchor points are wrong. If the ley line convergence runs northeast-southwest, you're fighting the natural energy flow."

"Mm." Tianlang-Jun's hand slid from the chair to Shen Qingqiu's shoulder like it belonged there. "Show me."

In the command center, Luo Binghe's spiritual energy spiked so hard the walls cracked.

Shang Qinghua shot a panicked glance at Luo Binghe. The demon lord hadn't moved, but the energy pouring off him had intensified—a pressure that made the air thick, that made it hard to breathe. His eyes were fixed on the projection with an intensity that promised violence.

"He's *touching* him."

Luo Binghe's words came out flat. Hollow. Somehow worse than a scream.

On the projection, Shen Qingqiu didn't even flinch. Just kept tracing corrections with his fingers, apparently unbothered by the ancient demon emperor's hand on his shoulder.

Bro, Shang Qinghua thought. *Read the room.*

"And here—" Shen Qingqiu's hand moved to another section. "This energy distribution is fundamentally flawed. You're assuming linear flow, but spiritual energy doesn't work like that. It pools, it eddies—"

"Fascinating." Tianlang-Jun pulled out the chair beside him and sat, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched.

"This is wrong. This is *also* wrong. The energy bleed alone would collapse the matrix within hours. And this—" Shen Qingqiu's voice dripped with disdain as he jabbed at the diagram with a finger. "—this is so wrong it circles back around to being insulting."

"You're merciless." Tianlang-Jun's laugh was delighted—warm and genuine, the sound of someone who had finally found a kindred spirit after decades of isolation. His hand found Shen Qingqiu's arm. His thumb traced slow circles. "Don't stop."

Shen Qingqiu huffed and kept going, gesturing sharply at the formation, completely engrossed in tearing apart whatever array formation Tianlang-Jun had shown him. If Shang Qinghua's hands weren't busy with the coordinate array and tracking matrices, he would facepalm.

"I have a confession," Tianlang-Jun said, something playful in his voice as he poured tea. "I may have deliberately included some of the worst passages in the texts I showed you yesterday. Just to see your face when you read them."

"You—" Shen Qingqiu's outrage was immediate. "That section on spiritual resonance wasn't just wrong, it was *offensively* wrong. I spent twenty minutes on it!"

"I know. You got this little furrow—" Tianlang-Jun reached out, almost touching the space between Shen Qingqiu's brows. "Right here. It was delightful."

"You wasted my time on purpose?"

"I prefer to think of it as enjoying your company." Tianlang-Jun's smile was unrepentant. "Though I'll admit the commentary was a bonus. You called the author a—what was it?—'an embarrassment to anyone who's ever held a brush.'"

"He *is*."

"You also suggested his calligraphy looked like 'a drunk chicken walking through ink.'"

Against all apparent will, the corner of Shen Qingqiu's mouth twitched.

"It did."

"And that his theories had 'all the structural integrity of wet paper in a monsoon.'"

The twitch became an actual smile. Small, reluctant—but real.

Tianlang-Jun looked at him like he'd been handed a gift. "There it is," he said softly. "I knew you could smile like that."

"He made him smile." Luo Binghe sounded like he was being gutted. "My father made him *smile*. How much longer?"

The question came out like ground glass.

Shang Qinghua's hands flew faster. "Five minutes. Maybe less if I can—"

"You have three."

On the projection, Tianlang-Jun was watching Shen Qingqiu with open fascination. "You're magnificent, you know," he said. "The way your mind works. I could listen to you tear apart array theory for hours."

"That's..." Shen Qingqiu's ears had gone slightly pink. "I was just pointing out structural flaws."

"You were being brilliant." Tianlang-Jun smiled, slow and warm. "It's intoxicating."

Shang Qinghua watched Shen Qingqiu's face do something complicated. That was definitely the look of a man trying very hard not to be affected and failing miserably.

Cucumber-bro, Shang Qinghua thought desperately. *Please. For all our sakes. Stop blushing.*

"I've been thinking," Tianlang-Jun said, setting down his tea. Something shifted in his expression—still warm, but more focused now. Intent. "About your condition. Without a Cure."

Shen Qingqiu's cup paused halfway to his lips. "What about it?"

"The flare-ups." Tianlang-Jun leaned forward, and the lamplight caught his features—the strong jaw, the silver-streaked hair, the genuine concern in those red eyes. "Zhuzhi-Lang told me how painful they are."

Shang Qinghua's blood went cold.

No. No no no. I hope he's not going where I think he's going with this—

"It's manageable," Shen Qingqiu said carefully. "I've lived with it for years."

"You've *suffered* with it for years." Tianlang-Jun's voice was gentle. "There's a difference."

He reached out, slow enough to telegraph the movement, and took Shen Qingqiu's free hand in his. His thumb traced gently across the knuckles.

Behind Shang Qinghua, something cracked. He didn't turn to see what Luo Binghe had just broken.

"I can help clear your meridians," he said. "Regular energy transfer can ease the symptoms. Hold the flare-ups at bay for a time."

He turned Shen Qingqiu's hand over, palm up. Drew a slow line down the center of it.

"That's... generous." Shen Qingqiu's voice had gone slightly strained.

"But it's temporary. The poison always returns." Tianlang-Jun's fingertip traced up to the pulse point at Shen Qingqiu's wrist. Lingered there, feeling the rhythm beneath the skin. "For longer relief, the energy exchange needs to be deeper. More direct."

In the scrying array, Shen Qingqiu's breath visibly caught. "More direct," he repeated, and his voice had gone slightly hoarse.

Shang Qinghua's stomach dropped.

Oh no. Oh, this is bad. This is so bad—

"Skin to skin." Tianlang-Jun's voice had dropped, gone velvet-soft. His gaze dropped to Shen Qingqiu's mouth for just a moment. "Breath to breath."

A pause. Heavy. Deliberate.

"The deeper the contact," Tianlang-Jun murmured, "the longer you stay free of the pain. Months, instead of weeks."

He looked up, meeting Shen Qingqiu's eyes. Held them.

Shang Qinghua could feel Luo Binghe's spiritual pressure building behind him like a storm about to break. The air was getting harder to breathe. Ice was forming on the edges of Mobei-Jun's sleeves—an involuntary reaction to the demonic energy saturating the room.

Don't say it, Shang Qinghua thought desperately. *Please don't say what I think you're going to say—*

"And for a permanent cure..."

Tianlang-Jun let the words hang. Let the silence stretch. Let Shen Qingqiu's pulse flutter under his fingertip.

Don't say it! Stop! STOP—

"Dual cultivation."

The words landed like a killing blow.

"With a heavenly demon."

"*No.*" The word came from Luo Binghe like it had been ripped from his chest. "No, no, *no*—"

"You don't need to answer now," Tianlang-Jun continued smoothly. "I simply want you to know the option exists. That I would be honored to help you this way." His voice dropped, low and warm and honey sweet. "That I would take such good care of you."

"How. Much. Longer." Each word was a separate threat.

"Two minutes," Shang Qinghua managed, voice strained. "Maybe less—I'm so close, my lord, *please*—"

Luo Binghe's spiritual energy surged. The walls groaned. Fractures split across the floor.

"He offered to—" Luo Binghe couldn't even finish the sentence. His crimson eyes filled with fury. His fingers had lengthened into claws, gouging furrows into his own palms. Blood dripped onto the cracked floor, sizzling where it touched the stone. "Give me the coordinates. Now."

"I don't have them yet—"

"Then I'll tear open every spatial barrier between here and there until I find him," Luo Binghe growled.

"That could take weeks! And you'd destabilize half the demon realm doing it!" Shang Qinghua was pleading now. "Junshang, please. I'm close. The triangulation is almost complete. Just—just please wait. Let me finish this!"

"I can't—" Luo Binghe's voice broke. He sounded like a man being flayed alive. "I can't watch this."

Mobei-Jun moved from his place by the door to stand beside him. Ice crystals formed in the air around him—not a threat, but a presence. A steadying force.

"Then don't," he said. His voice was quiet. Almost gentle, for him. "Let Qinghua work. Destroying this room will not help your Shen Qingqiu."

For a long moment, Luo Binghe didn't move.

Then, slowly, he turned away from the projection. It looked like it cost him everything.

He kept his gaze fixed on the far wall. His hands shook at his sides.

On the projection, Tianlang-Jun was still cradling Shen Qingqiu's wrist. His fingers resting right where he could feel every skip of that pulse.

"And if you're not comfortable with me specifically—" Tianlang-Jun's voice turned gentle, almost tender. He paused, letting the words hang. "—Zhuzhi-Lang has also offered. He's quite taken with you."

Another pause. A slow smile curved his lips.

"Either of us would worship you the way you deserve."

The demonic energy in the room became suffocating. Shang Qinghua's lungs ached with it.

"The snake," Luo Binghe said. His voice had gone terrifyingly flat. "He offered *the snake*."

"One minute," Shang Qinghua gasped. "JUST—GIVE ME ONE MORE MINUTE—"

"There's no pressure," Tianlang-Jun murmured. "We have all the time in the world here." He lifted Shen Qingqiu's hand, holding his gaze. "Just know the offer stands. Whenever you want. However you want. You need only ask."

He lifted Shen Qingqiu's wrist to his lips and pressed a kiss to that pulse point. And hummed —a low, satisfied sound that was almost obscene. Like he was savoring an exquisite delicacy. Like he could taste every flutter of Shen Qingqiu's heartbeat. Like he already knew exactly how the rest of him would taste.

Luo Binghe's head snapped back toward the projection. He couldn't help it.

Just in time to see Tianlang-Jun let his lips linger. To see the hunger in his eyes when he finally pulled back.

"I would deny you nothing."

And to see Shen Qingqiu flush from his cheeks to the tips of his ears. To see him look like he'd forgotten how to speak.

The sound Luo Binghe made in response had no name. It came from somewhere deep and wounded, the kind of noise that escaped when there were no words left.

Demonic energy exploded.

The floor beneath his feet shattered. Arrays collapsed. The entire underground palace shook as Luo Binghe's spiritual energy erupted beyond anything the formations could contain. Shang Qinghua threw himself over everything—the coordinate array, his calculations, the fragile tracking matrices—shielding them with his body as debris scattered across the ruined floor.

"I'm going," Luo Binghe snarled. "*Now.*"

Shang Qinghua's ears were ringing. His hands were bleeding from where he'd shielded the array stones. But he was still tracking, still calculating, still—

"YOU DON'T HAVE COORDINATES!" he screamed, scrambling upright. "MY LORD, PLEASE—I JUST NEED A LITTLE MORE TIME—"

On the projection, Tianlang-Jun rose with fluid grace. At the door, he paused. Looked back with a slow smile.

"Sweet dreams, my Qingqiu."

The door closed behind him.

My. Shang Qinghua's blood went cold.

Luo Binghe went still. The kind of still that came before earthquakes.

"My Qingqiu," he repeated softly. Then, louder: "*My*?!"

Xin Mo screamed into existence.

"He touched him. He kissed him. He—" Luo Binghe was pacing now, short violent movements, the demon sword trailing dark energy like smoke. "I'm going to kill him. I'm going to tear him apart."

"THIRTY SECONDS!" Shang Qinghua's voice cracked. "JUST—JUST THIRTY MORE SECONDS, MY LORD—"

On the projection, Shen Qingqiu let out a long breath. He was still touching his wrist, thumb pressed to the pulse point like he could feel the echo of lips there. He stayed like that for a moment—processing, or maybe wrestling with something.

Then Shen Qingqiu shook his head, just slightly. He pulled his hand away from his wrist—deliberate, decisive—and stood. Something in his expression had hardened into decision. He moved to the mirror and pressed his hand against the glass, against the fading connection, the dying signal.

"I'm still here," he said, quiet but certain. His hand pressed harder against the glass. "I'm waiting for you."

Luo Binghe stopped pacing. His eyes fixed on that image—on Shen Qingqiu's hand against the glass.

"Ten seconds," Shang Qinghua breathed, barely audible. "Ten seconds, come on, *come on*—"

"Come find me." His fingers curled against the glass, pressed white at the tips. His voice went thin on the name, fragile in a way Shang Qinghua had never heard from him. "Please, Binghe."

Something in Luo Binghe's face shattered and rebuilt itself.

"Almost got it—"

Xin Mo blazed with dark fire. Luo Binghe raised it, ready to tear through dimensions coordinates or no coordinates—

"GOT IT!" The words tore from Shang Qinghua's throat. "Eastern quadrant, third sub-dimension, coordinate set Xuan-7-4-2!"

Luo Binghe moved before the last syllable left his mouth.

The remaining arrays shattered. Every formation Shang Qinghua had spent hours building, every delicate matrix of spiritual energy—gone in an instant as Luo Binghe stopped holding

back. The scrying projection fractured into a thousand pieces of light. Stone exploded outward from where he'd been standing. The ceiling buckled. Mobei-Jun threw up an ice barrier to shield Shang Qinghua from the worst of the debris.

It didn't mean anything—Mobei-Jun was just being practical, protecting his investment, his spy—but *still*. Shang Qinghua could swoon.

Protect me more*, my king!*

But there was no time for swooning. Xin Mo carved through reality like a blade through silk, opening a wound in space itself. Dark energy poured through—focused now, directed, a weapon rather than a storm.

"Junshang, wait!" Shang Qinghua called. "You can't go alone—"

"Watch me," Luo Binghe said.

And stepped through.

Reality snapped shut behind him like a closing jaw.

In the ruined command center, Shang Qinghua stared at the space where Luo Binghe had been.

And then it was quiet.

Not peaceful quiet. The kind of quiet that came after a disaster, when the screaming stopped and you could finally hear how loud your own heartbeat was. His hands were shaking. His lungs still ached from breathing through that much demonic pressure. And somewhere in the eastern quadrant, Luo Binghe was about to tear through dimensions with the fury of a man who'd just watched his father flirt with the love of his life.

Cold fingers touched his jaw, tilting his face up.

Mobei-Jun stood over him, ice still crystallized on his sleeves from the barrier he'd thrown up. His expression was as unreadable as ever, but his thumb brushed along Shang Qinghua's cheekbone—checking for injury, or maybe just checking that he was still in one piece.

"I'm fine," Shang Qinghua managed. "I'm fine, my king, I just—"

Something flickered in his peripheral vision.

A shard of the projection array was still glowing—one stubborn fragment that had survived the destruction. The image was fractured, broken, but Shang Qinghua could still make out a sliver of Shen Qingqiu's face. His hand pressed to the glass.

Still waiting.

"Good luck, cucumber-bro," Shang Qinghua said to no one. "You're going to need it."

The fragment flickered one last time.

And went dark.

Chapter End Notes

SQH: *watching SQQ get flustered by TLJ*
SQH: bro
SQH: bro please
SQH: luo binghe is RIGHT HERE
SQQ: *smiles and blushes*
LBH: *demonic energy explodes*
SQH: MY CALCULATIONS
SQH: I'M TRYING TO SAVE YOUR LIFE HERE
SQQ internally: BETRAYED BY MY OWN FACE

TLJ: I would deny you nothing
SQQ: [.exe has stopped responding]
LBH: [.exe has stopped responding]
SQH: I'm the only one working here

Chapter 17: Interlude: The Other Side of The Mirror

Chapter Summary

> In which Shen Qingqiu sits very still at a table and destroys his own denial with surgical precision.

Chapter Notes

> An interlude added after initial posting to give SQQ's side of things after TLJ makes the dual cultivation offer. Slotting in between the original chapters 16 and 17.
>
> I also just posted a new Chapter 21, which may have gotten lost in the double update notifications, so please go read that too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The door closed behind Tianlang-Jun with a quiet click.

Shen Qingqiu sat very still at the table, his hand resting palm-up in his lap where Tianlang-Jun had placed it. Set it down gently, like something worth being careful with, before he rose and left.

The lamp flame trembled. A moth had found its way in through the lattice and was circling in slow, drunken orbits, drawn toward the light it would eventually destroy itself against.

Relatable, Shen Qingqiu thought, and then hated himself a little.

His wrist was warm.

Not from ambient temperature — the room was always perfectly regulated, because of course it was, because Tianlang-Jun's arrays were brilliant and his hospitality was impeccable and his pocket dimension existed in a state of perpetual, curated comfort that made Shen Qingqiu want to scream. No, his wrist was warm from the specific, localized heat of a mouth that had lingered there. Lips pressed to the thin skin over his pulse. A hum that had vibrated down through tendon and bone and settled somewhere behind his sternum like a coal that refused to go out.

Dual cultivation. With a heavenly demon.

He pressed his thumb to the pulse point. Could still feel the echo of that contact — phantom warmth, nerve memory, whatever the cultivation equivalent of a psychosomatic response

was.

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes.

The responsible thing to do right now would be to think strategically. Assess the situation. Calculate escape vectors and potential risks and the geopolitical implications of a former demon emperor offering to cure his incurable poison through sex.

Instead, his brain was doing... this.

This being: replaying the way Tianlang-Jun's voice had dropped on *skin to skin, breath to breath*. The weight of his thumb tracing slow circles on the inside of Shen Qingqiu's arm. The look in those crimson eyes — warm and unhurried, like a man who had all the time in the world and intended to spend every second of it paying attention.

The worst part — the truly unforgivable part — was that Tianlang-Jun was not performing. Was not running a seduction playbook or executing some calculated campaign of targeted charm. He was just... like that. Genuinely curious, genuinely delighted, genuinely interested in Shen Qingqiu's mind before his body.

He had deliberately inserted errors into array texts just to watch Shen Qingqiu get angry about them.

Who *did* that?

Who found someone's intellectual outrage *delightful*?

Who looked at a man tearing their work apart and thought, *there, that's the version of you I wanted to see*?

Shen Qingqiu opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. Painted plaster. Elegant brushwork depicting cranes in flight. Everything in this place was beautiful. Everything was designed to make you feel like an honored guest rather than a prisoner. Everything was a kindness that asked for nothing in return except the pleasure of your company.

He could stay.

The thought arrived fully formed, quiet and treacherous, and Shen Qingqiu did not flinch from it. He turned it over in his hands like a stone pulled from a riverbed — smooth, heavy, real.

He could stay here. Accept the dual cultivation offer. Let Tianlang-Jun cure him. Spend his days debating array theory and his nights sleeping in silk and his mornings drinking tea that was always the perfect temperature, and it would be — fine. It would be good, even. Tianlang-Jun would never bore him. Would never stop finding new ways to make him argue, new texts to get wrong on purpose, new excuses to lean close and murmur *show me how you think* like that was a normal thing to say to another person.

And Shen Qingqiu could no longer hide behind the pretense that this was purely an intellectual thing. Because it had stopped being purely intellectual around the third night,

when Tianlang-Jun had laughed at something Shen Qingqiu said — really laughed, head tilted back, surprise bright in those crimson eyes — and a quiet pressure settled beneath his ribs, unfamiliar and deeply inconvenient.

He was *feeling things*. For the demon emperor who had kidnapped him. Things that were warm and easy and flattering and didn't require him to look too closely at any of the terrifying corners of himself.

He could let it happen. Let it take its course. It would be so easy — and it would be real. That was the worst part. It wouldn't even be settling. Tianlang-Jun was brilliant and attentive and devastating, and whatever was growing between them had roots that went deeper than Stockholm syndrome, no matter how convenient that explanation would have been.

But.

But even now, even with warmth still ghosting his wrist and the shape of Tianlang-Jun's laugh still echoing in the room — some stubborn, inconvenient, *ruinous* part of him was still sitting in a water prison with its back against cold stone and Luo Binghe's forehead pressed against its own.

I've always loved you. Even when I wanted to hate you. It's always been you, Shizun. Always. Only.

Shen Qingqiu's hand curled in his lap. His nails bit into his palm.

He had been so careful not to think about this. Had spent almost a full week folding the memory into smaller and smaller shapes, tucking it behind other thoughts, burying it under layers of denial and distraction and Tianlang-Jun's excellent congee. And it had worked — mostly — during the day, when there were debates to have and gardens to explore and a charming demon emperor to not develop feelings for.

But the nights.

The nights were a different country.

In the dark, with no distractions left, the memory unfolded every time. Hands cradling his face — too gentle, impossibly gentle, for someone who could crush stone. Eyes raw with an intensity that felt less like being looked at and more like being *read*. The ragged edge of a voice that had been screaming for years and only just now found the one person it had been screaming for.

He still didn't fully understand what Binghe had meant. Not then, not now. There had been too much happening — the kiss, the confession, the Without a Cure flare-up, and too many other things he refused to process on a psychological level.

But the feeling of it.

The feeling of Binghe's hands on his face, shaking with restraint. The way his voice had cracked on *always* and *only*, like the words were being pulled from somewhere deep and

wounded and secret. The way he'd kissed Shen Qingqiu like he was drowning, like he was starving, like everything he'd ever wanted had been condensed into a single point of contact and he was terrified it would be taken away.

That kiss had not been comfortable. Had not been anything like the kisses described in PIDW. It had been desperate and clumsy and too much — the kind of kiss that came from someone who couldn't keep his ravenous hunger from bleeding through.

And Shen Qingqiu hadn't kissed him back.

That fact sat in his chest like broken glass.

He'd been too shocked. Too afraid. Too busy processing the impossible reality of the protagonist of a stallion novel kissing his male former teacher in a prison cell, and his stupid brain had short-circuited on genre logistics.

He hadn't kissed back.

But he also hadn't pushed away.

Shen Qingqiu drove the heels of his hands against his eyes.

This was the part he'd been avoiding. The part buried under all the denial and the genre complaints and the very convenient kidnapping that had given him an excuse not to deal with any of it.

Because if he was being honest — ruthlessly, humiliatingly, strip-away-every-defense honest — the reason he hadn't kissed Binghe back wasn't confusion or surprise or some intellectual crisis about genre conventions.

It was fear.

Not of Binghe. Never of Binghe — not really, not underneath all the carefully constructed anxiety about blackened protagonists and revenge arcs and the things a scum villain was supposed to deserve.

Fear of *wanting* it.

Fear of wanting someone he barely knew.

Because that was the absurd, humiliating core of it, wasn't it? He didn't *know* Luo Binghe. Not the adult version — not really. He knew the boy he'd raised. The disciple he'd taken under his wing and taught and fed congee to and watched grow from a mistreated child into someone extraordinary. He'd loved that boy — of course he had. Fiercely, protectively, with the kind of uncomplicated devotion that came from being handed a life to shelter and building your whole identity around the refusal to fail at it.

But the man in the water prison — the one with burning eyes and hands that trembled with the effort of being careful, the one who had said *always* and *only* like they were the truest things he'd ever spoken — that person was almost a stranger. Three years in the Abyss had

forged someone new. Someone Shen Qingqiu had spent exactly one intense, shattering encounter with before being ripped away.

One encounter. That was all he had. A handful of minutes in a flooded cell, and his entire internal landscape had shifted on its axis like a plate of the earth giving way.

The moth struck the lamp glass with a soft *tink*. Circled. Struck again.

He had always loved Binghe. That wasn't the revelation. He could admit that much without the ground opening beneath him — he had loved his disciple with a distant, steady warmth that he'd filed neatly under *mentorship* and *pride* and *natural attachment to a protagonist one is responsible for raising*. The paintings had been part of that. The sculptures. The hours spent perfecting the angle of a jaw, the curve of a smile, the exact way candlelight caught in dark curls — all of it had been devotion, yes, but devotion he'd told himself was teacherly. Parental, even. Nothing more.

And now here was the thing he'd never let himself examine too closely: he had loved Luo Binghe before he ever met him. Had loved him on a screen, in a novel, as a *character* — the beautiful, tragic protagonist whose suffering had made Shen Yuan furious enough to hate-read four million words. The paintings had started as fan art. Had stayed fan art, in his mind, even as the subject stopped being a fictional character and became a real boy kneeling in his bamboo house, looking up at him with trust he hadn't earned. He'd loved the *idea* of Binghe for so long that the devotion had calcified into something he could file under *appreciation* and never look at again.

But ideas didn't have hands that shook when they touched you. Ideas didn't have burning eyes that searched your face like you were the answer to a question they'd been asking for years. Ideas didn't kiss you in water prisons with the kind of consuming intensity that made it hard to breathe just *remembering* it.

The idea had become a man. And the man wanted him — had looked at him with such raw, staggering need that Shen Qingqiu's whole body had recognized it before his mind caught up, had leaned into it instinctively, like a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

That was the part that undid him. Not that Luo Binghe existed. That the protagonist Luo Binghe actually *wanted* him. Wanted him with an intensity that took his breath away even now, alone in a room, just thinking about the way those eyes had looked at him.

Shen Qingqiu lowered his hands. Looked at the mirror across the room.

The Sound-Resonance Flower behind it was dying — he could feel the last threads of spiritual energy guttering like a candle in wind. The array was still active, barely, but the connection was thinning. Whatever signal it was broadcasting would fade within minutes.

If he was going to do something, it had to be now.

And this was the choice, wasn't it? The real one.

Not comfort versus chaos. Not safe versus dangerous. Not the flattering option versus the frightening one.

Tianlang-Jun was something already growing. Something real and warm that Shen Qingqiu could see the shape of — days of debate stretching into months, the slow deepening of affection into something richer, a life built on mutual fascination with a man who would never stop finding him interesting. He knew what that would look like. Could trace its outline. It made sense.

Luo Binghe was —

He was just a single moment in a water prison. One pair of hands cradling his face, one voice saying *always, only, you*, and Shen Qingqiu had no idea what a life with him would even look like. Couldn't trace the outline. Couldn't see the shape. All he had was that single overwhelming encounter and the wreckage it had left in his chest, and choosing Luo Binghe now meant choosing to love not the character in a story or the disciple he'd been proud of but the *man* Luo Binghe had become — the adult he'd barely met, the version forged by three years in a place Shen Qingqiu had sent him.

Choosing Luo Binghe meant choosing someone who had walked into an alcove full of obsessive fan art and instead of being horrified, had been *heartbroken* — heartbroken because he thought it wasn't *him*.

What kind of person responded to discovering their teacher's secret fanart collection by being devastated that it might be dedicated to someone else?

The same kind of person who had survived three years in the Abyss and come back still capable of tenderness.

The same kind of person who kissed like the world was ending because for him, every moment he couldn't reach Shen Qingqiu, it *was*.

And Luo Binghe doesn't know why I —

The thought landed with a quiet, devastating weight, and the ripples spread through everything.

Binghe didn't know *why* his beloved Shizun had pushed him into the Abyss.

He could try to justify the reason, but it ultimately was not out of some noble, tortured sacrifice or a grand plan to make him stronger — but because the System had told Shen Qingqiu he would die if he didn't. Because Shen Qingqiu had stood on that cliff and chosen his own survival over his disciple's safety, and every justification he'd built around it since — *he's the protagonist, he'll be fine, it was the only way* — didn't change the ugly, essential math of it.

I let Luo Binghe fall to save myself.

And Binghe, who had spent three years clawing his way out of hell, who had come back and kissed him like he was something worth crossing dimensions for — that Binghe still thought his Shizun was someone worth wanting. Still thought the man who pushed him was worth the raw, shattered tenderness of that confession.

What happens when Luo Binghe learns the truth?

Tianlang-Jun already knew what Shen Qingqiu was. Had looked at him clearly, with no illusions, and chosen him anyway. There was no secret that could curdle that — no revelation waiting in the wings to turn warmth into betrayal. Choosing Tianlang-Jun meant never having to stand in front of someone he loved and watch their face change.

Choosing Binghe meant choosing to be chosen back…or not. It meant standing in front of a man who had rebuilt himself around the memory of his teacher and saying *I let you fall because I was afraid to die*, and having no idea whether what survived that confession would be enough.

It might not be.

He might reach for Binghe and find nothing reaching back.

The silk of Tianlang-Jun's robes whispered against his skin as he rose from the table. Every inch of fabric felt like a costume he was ready to take off.

Without a Cure pulsed dully in his meridians as he crossed the room, a reminder that his body was a borrowed thing, fragile and compromised and running on borrowed time.

Shen Qingqiu stopped in front of the mirror.

His reflection looked back at him — pale, tired, wearing another man's clothes. Hair loose over his shoulders. Eyes that looked like they belonged to someone who had finally stopped pretending he didn't know what he wanted.

The array behind the glass flickered. Barely there. A thread of connection stretching across dimensions, thin as spider silk, strong as the stubbornness of a man who had read a forty-page exposition dump and remembered every word.

Somewhere on the other end of this signal, Shang Qinghua was monitoring frequencies. Somewhere beyond that, in a ruined command center, Luo Binghe was —

He was —

Shen Qingqiu pressed his hand against the glass.

Cool under his palm. Smooth. The faintest vibration of spiritual energy humming through the dormant array, awakened by the flower's dying pulse.

He could feel the connection — fragile, guttering, seconds from collapse. Whatever he said now would likely be the last thing to travel through before the signal died.

He could say *help me*. Could say *tell Shang Qinghua to hurry*, which was practical and strategic and exactly the kind of thing a reasonable person in a kidnapping scenario would prioritize.

Instead, he thought about Luo Binghe's hands. About trembling fingers cradling his face with a tenderness so profound that it made Shen Qingqiu's heart ache. About red-rimmed eyes and a voice scraped raw saying *always, only, you* like those were the last words he'd ever need.

About the fact that Shen Qingqiu had spent years making art of this person's face and filing it under *fanart hobby*, and Luo Binghe had looked at that art and his first thought hadn't been *that's strange* or *that's excessive* — his first thought had been *he loves someone else, and it's not me, and I'm not enough*.

Shen Qingqiu's fingers curled against the glass. Pressed harder. White at the tips.

He wasn't drifting. Wasn't defaulting. Wasn't being swept along by whoever reached him first or whoever made the most compelling argument.

He was *choosing*.

Right now, right here, in borrowed robes with a dying array under his hand and his heart hammering so hard it hurt — he was choosing the uncertain thing. The terrifying thing. The one that made no rational sense, because how did you build a life on a single moment in a flooded cell and the ache it left behind?

He didn't know. He wanted to find out anyway.

"I'm still here," he said. Quiet, but certain. The connection stuttered beneath his fingers as his words passed through it.

His fingers splayed wider against the glass, bearing down until the joints ached. He could feel the signal thinning, the last seconds draining away like sand through fingers, and there was no time for eloquence or strategy or any of the careful composure he'd spent years perfecting.

"I'm waiting for you."

His voice cracked on the next part. Went thin and raw and nothing like a peak lord, nothing like a composed immortal, nothing like anyone who had their life together even slightly.

"Come find me."

The array flickered. Almost gone.

"Please, Binghe."

His name. Just his name. Not a command, not a negotiation, not a strategic communication from a captive to his would-be rescuer.

A man pressing his hand to a mirror and reaching for the person he loved.

The signal died.

Shen Qingqiu stayed where he was. Palm flat against cold glass, breath fogging the surface, heart doing something structurally unsound behind his ribs.

He had done it. Had said the terrifying thing. Had stood in a comfortable room that smelled like sandalwood and chosen the person who smelled like ozone and desperate wanting.

He did not move away from the mirror. Could not make his hand leave the glass — not yet, not while some irrational part of him believed that if he held on long enough, he might feel warmth on the other side. Fingers pressing back. A palm larger than his, fitted against the same surface from an impossible distance.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: I will carefully evaluate two viable romantic options using a rigorous cost-benefit framework
SQQ's mind: [a single image of Binghe's hands shaking]
SQQ's mind: that's it. that's the whole analysis.

Chapter 18: What He Earned

Chapter Notes

> Yeeaaahh so I was supposed to be going back to work today, but Binghe had A LOT to say. He couldn't let another moment pass without letting you all know exactly how much he'd burn the world down for his Shizun. Chapter count has increased by one. I'm staying late to do actual work now. No regrets (some regrets).
>
> Also, I didn't spend as much time editing this as usual because I have to go back to work. But now that Binghe has had his say, the next chapter will be posted when real life allows, as I mentioned in my note for the last chapter. Slightly anxious this one isn't as polished but I literally do not have time and I need LBH out of my head so I can function as a human being again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm still here."

Shizun's voice echoed in Binghe's skull as Xin Mo split reality open. Not a memory—a brand. Burned into him from the scrying array, from watching Shizun press his hand to the glass with something desperate in his eyes.

"I'm waiting for you."

The first barrier shattered before Binghe consciously struck it.

Seventeen layers of spatial distortion. The most sophisticated pocket dimension in three realms, designed by a demon emperor who'd had decades to perfect the art of hiding.

Binghe didn't care.

"Come find me."

The second barrier fell. The third. Xin Mo sang with hunger, feeding on his fury, and for once Binghe let it gorge without restraint. Let it feast. He had rage enough to fuel a thousand portals and desperation enough to tear through a thousand more.

"Please, Binghe."

His name in Shizun's mouth. Not a command—a *plea*.

Shizun had asked for him.

Had pressed his hand to the glass and *asked for him*.

The fourth barrier didn't so much break as dissolve, Xin Mo's dark energy eating through it like acid. The fifth caught him for half a heartbeat—denser, woven with older magic—before his fury surged and the resistance crumbled to nothing.

And beneath the desperate hope, the rage was building.

Because Binghe had watched. Had stood in that command center with his hands clenched into claws while Tianlang-Jun touched and smiled and *offered*—

"And for a permanent cure... dual cultivation. With a heavenly demon."

The sixth barrier screamed as it died.

"That I would take such good care of you."

Care. As if Tianlang-Jun knew the first thing about caring for Shen Qingqiu. As if a week of tea and conversation had taught him anything worth knowing.

Binghe had spent *years* learning how to care for Shizun. Had memorized which teas soothed his throat after long lectures and which ones he only pretended to like out of politeness. Had learned to read the minute shifts in his posture that meant his back was aching, had found excuses to adjust cushions and reposition furniture so Shizun would be comfortable without ever having to admit weakness. Had tracked the lunar cycle because Without a Cure flared worse on certain nights, had kept medicine warming in his sleeves *just in case*, had lain awake cataloguing every cough and every caught breath and every moment where Shizun's mask slipped enough to show pain underneath.

He knew that Shizun unconsciously leaned toward warmth when he was tired. Had rearranged entire rooms around that knowledge. Had positioned braziers and adjusted seating so Shizun would end up comfortable without ever having to ask. Had spent *hours* engineering the perfect configuration of furniture and heat sources so that Shizun would drift, unthinking, toward the spot Binghe had prepared for him—the warmest seat, the softest cushion, the place where the light fell gentlest on his eyes.

Shizun never noticed. Never realized that his comfort had been orchestrated, that every moment of ease had been *designed* by hands that would rearrange the entire world if it meant Shizun would want for nothing.

He had made caring for Shen Qingqiu into a *science*. Into a religion. Into the organizing principle of his entire existence.

And Tianlang-Jun thought *a week* qualified him to speak of care?

The seventh barrier. The eighth. Each one fell faster than the last.

"Zhuzhi-Lang has also offered. He's quite taken with you."

His father had offered *the snake*.

The ninth barrier shuddered under Binghe's assault, ancient protections groaning—

"Either of us would worship you the way you deserve."

—and Binghe's vision went white.

Worship.

His father dared speak of *worship* while offering to share the privilege like table scraps.

The ninth barrier cracked. Split. Fell.

Worship. *Worship*. The word echoed through Binghe's skull, sharp-edged and mocking.

If dual cultivation with Shizun was worship—and it *was*, it was the holiest act Binghe could conceive of, more sacred than any scripture, more profound than any cultivation breakthrough, the culmination of everything he'd trained and sacrificed and *become*—then how could you speak of it so *casually*? How could you offer someone else in your place, as if the honor of touching Shen Qingqiu was a task to be delegated, a chore to be divided up based on convenience and preference?

You didn't *delegate* worship. You didn't offer alternatives to prayer.

If Tianlang-Jun truly understood what it meant to touch Shen Qingqiu—to be *permitted* to touch him, to lay hands on that calamitous beauty and not die from the privilege—he would have killed Zhuzhi-Lang for even *thinking* about it. Would have torn out the serpent's tongue for daring to want what should belong to one person and one person alone.

That was what worship looked like. That was what devotion *meant*.

Only me. Forever. Until the stars burn out and the realms collapse and there is nothing left but ash and echoes—only me.

That was what Binghe would have said. What Binghe *did* say, every day, in every action, in the years of service and the months of preparation and the way he had kept his body untouched because it had only ever belonged to one person.

His father didn't understand worship. Didn't understand that true devotion meant wanting to be the *only* one. That offering alternatives wasn't generosity—it was proof that you didn't want it badly enough.

Binghe wanted it so badly his vision blurred. So badly his teeth ached. So badly that some nights in the Abyss he'd bitten through his own lip just to have something to feel that wasn't the *wanting*, and even the taste of blood had made him think of Shizun's mouth and whether it would taste like tea or medicine or something sweeter, and he'd had to stop that line of thinking before it drove him actually insane instead of just desperate.

And Tianlang-Jun stood there offering to *share*.

"I would be honored to help you this way."

Honored. But not so honored that he would hoard that honor for himself. Not so honored that the thought of another man's hands on Shizun's body made him want to tear the world apart.

Binghe would have *slaughtered* anyone who tried to share this with him. Would have carved them into pieces so small not even their ancestors could identify the remains. The mere *idea* of someone else's hands on Shizun's skin—someone else's mouth on his throat, someone else learning the sounds he made, the way he trembled, the places that made him gasp—

That was *his*. All of it. Every future gasp and shiver and broken moan that Shizun had never given anyone—those belonged to *Binghe*, were *owed* to Binghe, not because he deserved them but because he had *worked* for them, had spent years building himself into something worthy of earning them, and he would not *share*.

Binghe's vision went red at the edges. His grip on Xin Mo tightened until the hilt creaked, until the demonic metal groaned beneath his fingers, until he could feel the sword's hunger surging up to meet his own in a harmony so complete it should have terrified him.

It didn't.

Tianlang-Jun didn't understand. *Couldn't* understand.

Because *no one* deserved Shen Qingqiu.

How could they? How could anyone deserve *that*—the impossible elegance of him, the way he moved through the world like a painting come to life, like something that should only exist in poetry and fever dreams. Every single part of him a miracle. Binghe had spent *years* admiring the way his hands looked wrapped around a fan, around a teacup, around a brush, had catalogued every gesture and every motion until he could draw them from memory, until the shape of Shizun's fingers haunted him more thoroughly than any curse ever could.

Shen Qingqiu was not *beautiful*. Beautiful was too small a word, too common, too much like something that could be possessed by ordinary means. Shen Qingqiu was beyond devastating—he was *calamitous*. Was the kind of singular that only happened once in a thousand years, the kind that made immortals weep and demons kneel and Luo Binghe lose every thought in his head except *him, him, him*.

No one in any of the three realms deserved his Shizun. Not the peak lords who saw only the cold mask he wore for protection.Not the disciples who feared his temper and never questioned why his punishments were always lighter than they deserved. Not Liu Qingge who fought beside him without ever truly *seeing* him. Not Yue Qingyuan with his guilt and his distance and his failure to *do* anything about either.

Not Tianlang-Jun with his borrowed memories and his pretty words and his shameless *presumption*—who looked at Shen Qingqiu and saw a story, a mystery, a puzzle to be solved, instead of falling to his knees at the sheer privilege of being in the same room.

Not even Binghe.

But Binghe *knew* that. Had known it from the moment he'd first understood what the ache in his chest meant, what the hunger in his gut was reaching for. He had looked at Shizun—elegant, untouchable, impossibly beautiful Shizun—and understood with perfect clarity that he was reaching for something far beyond his worth.

Especially not Binghe, with his demon blood and his hungry hands and the darkness that lived in him like a second heart. Binghe who had dreamed of doing things to Shizun that would make the heavens weep, who had woken in the Abyss with Shizun's name on his lips and violence in his veins, who wanted to worship and devour in equal measure and couldn't always tell where one ended and the other began.

The tenth barrier rose before him, thick with layered protections. Older than the others, reinforced with something that tasted like blood sacrifice and ancient intention. For three agonizing seconds, Xin Mo's edge skidded across its surface without purchase.

No one deserved Shen Qingqiu.

But Binghe had *worked* for him anyway.

Had devoted every moment of his existence to closing that gap. Had bled for him. Burned for him. Trained until his hands were raw and his meridians screamed. Had survived the Abyss on nothing but spite and the image of green eyes behind his eyelids, then rebuilt himself from nothing in the dark—taken every scrap of himself that wasn't good enough, and that was *all* of it, every single piece, and *forced* it to become something better. Something stronger. Had conquered the demon realm, infiltrated Huan Hua, built power in two worlds simultaneously—all of it, *all of it*, just to become something that could stand beside Shen Qingqiu without shame.

Tianlang-Jun thought he could simply *want* and that would be enough. Thought desire was the same as dedication. Thought a week of infatuation entitled him to what Binghe had spent years *earning*.

But wanting wasn't earning.

And Binghe had paid for his place in blood and darkness and the kind of devotion that remade a person from the inside out.

The barrier buckled under the weight of his devotion. Cracked beneath his certainty. Fell.

And when Binghe thought about what dual cultivation would mean—what it would mean to finally, *finally* be permitted to touch Shizun the way he'd dreamed about for years—

It wasn't something to be *delegated*.

It was sacred. Holy. The culmination of everything Binghe had worked for, wrapped in the terrifying vulnerability of being *allowed*. He had prepared for it with the same obsessive dedication he brought to everything else, because anything less would be unworthy of Shizun.

He had read every text he could find on the arts of the bedchamber—erotic manuals and cultivation treatises and the kinds of scrolls that made even demon generals cough and look away. Had swallowed his pride and sought out succubi in the demon realm, sat through their laughing assessments of his inexperience while they explained in explicit detail how to pleasure a partner until they forgot their own name.

How do I make sure he feels good? How do I make sure he never wants anyone else? How do I become the best he's ever had?

The succubi had found his intensity amusing. One had asked, with a knowing smile, whether he'd like to practice.

He had refused. Had always refused.

His body wasn't his to give away. It belonged to Shizun—had belonged to Shizun since before Binghe understood what that meant. No one else had ever touched him. No one else ever would.

But that didn't mean he went to this unprepared.

He had learned his own body instead—mapped every sensitive place, every response, catalogued what made him shudder and gasp and lose control. Not for his own pleasure, but so he would *know*. So that when the time came, he could translate that knowledge into something that would undo Shizun completely.

The eleventh barrier shimmered with defensive arrays. Binghe noted them, dismissed them, cut through.

And he had learned to gentle his strength.

This was perhaps the hardest thing. Harder than surviving the Abyss, harder than mastering Xin Mo, harder than keeping his demon mark hidden while the Old Palace Master smiled his oily smile and spoke of *removing obstacles*.

Binghe's hands had killed. Had crushed throats and torn through flesh and painted walls with the blood of his enemies. In the demon realm, they called him merciless—and they weren't wrong. He had held men's lives in his grip and squeezed until they stopped, had felt bones splinter under his fingers, had learned exactly how much pressure it took to end something permanently.

Those same hands trembled at the thought of touching Shizun. Shook like he was still that pathetic disciple kneeling in the woodshed, like he hadn't conquered realms, like all the blood he'd spilled meant *nothing* compared to the possibility of being allowed to cup Shizun's face in his palms. He had murdered men for less than a fraction of what he wanted from Shizun. Had destroyed entire bloodlines for insults that mattered less to him than one of Shizun's careless smiles. And still his hands *shook*.

Because Shizun was *fragile*. Not in cultivation—his spiritual power was formidable when Without a Cure wasn't ravaging him—but in the ways that mattered. In the delicate

architecture of his collarbones. In the pale skin that bruised if you looked at it wrong. In the elegant fingers and slender wrists and the throat that Binghe had imagined pressing his lips to so many times he'd lost count.

He could break Shizun so easily. Could hurt him without meaning to, could forget his own strength in a moment of passion and leave marks that had nothing to do with pleasure.

So he had practiced.

In the dark hours of the Abyss, when the hunger threatened to consume him and Xin Mo whispered promises of power, Binghe had wrapped his hands around stones. Had held them—gently, carefully, with all the restraint he could muster—and forced himself *not* to crush. Over and over, night after night, until his muscles learned a different kind of memory. Until he could trust himself to hold something precious without destroying it.

The twelfth barrier fell.

The demon realm knew him as a monster. The cultivation world would learn to fear him soon enough. He had become something terrible, something that made even powerful demons step carefully, something remade in the Abyss's endless night and blood and the absolute refusal to die.

But for Shizun—

For Shizun, he had taught himself to be soft.

Had practiced cradling fragile things until his hands remembered how to be gentle. Had imagined, countless times, what it would feel like to cup Shizun's face in his palms, to trace the line of his jaw, to hold him close without leaving bruises.

The monster that the three realms feared had spent years learning tenderness for exactly one person.

And his father thought a week of flirtation made him worthy of what Binghe had spent his *entire life* preparing for?

Tianlang-Jun had discussed array theory for a week and thought he knew Shen Qingqiu.

Binghe had spent *years* learning to read him.

The thirteenth barrier fell.

He knew the difference between Shizun's silences—knew that the one that came with a slight tension in his jaw meant worry, not irritation, even though they looked identical to everyone else. Had learned to bring tea when it was worry and make himself scarce when it was genuine annoyance, reading the infinitesimal shifts in muscle tension that betrayed what Shizun would never say aloud.

The fourteenth barrier. The fifteenth.

Tianlang-Jun had debated formations and anchor points for a few days, and Shizun had apparently found it stimulating.

But Binghe had seen Shizun's composure crack *completely*. Had witnessed him forget his fan mid-argument about poetry, gesturing with both hands, voice rising with a passion he'd be mortified to know anyone had witnessed. Had learned that behind the cool exterior was someone who held *opinions*—violent, passionate opinions about everything from sword forms to the proper way to annotate cultivation manuals to which disciples on which peaks had the worst manners.

Shizun had once thrown a book across the room because the author suggested spiritual arrays were superior to environmental ones. Had called the writing "an offense to anyone with functioning meridians" and refused to shelve it properly for three days out of sheer spite.

Had gotten so passionate about *calligraphy styles* that he'd forgotten to eat.

Tianlang-Jun had seen the refined scholar who debated array theory over tea.

Binghe had seen the man underneath. The one who muttered to himself when he thought he was alone, sometimes in phrases that didn't quite fit the world around them. There was one phrase in particular that Binghe had never been able to parse: *wù dé fàk*, breathed out in moments of extreme frustration or disbelief, the tones wrong, the meaning unclear. He'd searched through poetry collections and ancient texts, convinced it must be some obscure literary reference, some fragment of classical verse that a scholar of Shizun's caliber would know.

He'd never found it.

Had memorized the exact intonation anyway, the way Shizun's lips shaped the strange sounds when he thought no one could hear.

The sixteenth barrier trembled as he approached.

Sometimes Shizun laughed at nothing—a soft exhale, a quirk of his lips, responding to some private joke that existed only in his own mind. Binghe had spent years trying to understand what amused Shizun in those moments and never succeeded. But he knew the sound of it. Could pick it out from across a peak.

He knew how Shizun's breathing changed when Without a Cure was flaring—not enough for a physician to catch, barely enough for anyone to notice at all. The subtle hitch. The careful way he held himself still. Binghe had memorized the rhythm of it, had learned to appear with medicine and warmed blankets before Shizun ever admitted he was in pain.

Not that Shizun ever asked for anything truly important. That was something else Tianlang-Jun would never understand.

Shizun would give endlessly—his time, his attention, his quiet acts of care that he thought no one noticed—but he would never *ask*. Would endure exhaustion and illness and pain before admitting he needed something in return.

So Binghe had learned to give without being asked. Had made it an art form, a discipline—and more than that, had learned to disguise his care as selfishness. Preparing elaborate meals with all of his Shizun's favorites because *"this disciple needed the practice"* when he had noticed Shizun had skipped lunch again. Adjusting the window screen because *"the glare is bothering this disciple's eyes"* when the afternoon sun had been falling directly on Shizun's writing desk. Fetching a warmer robe because *"this disciple was already going to the storage room"* when he had seen the almost imperceptible shiver Shizun would never admit to.

Every gift wrapped in the pretense of his own need, so Shizun's kindness would let him accept it.

Tianlang-Jun had known Shizun for a *week*. Had he discovered yet that caring for Shen Qingqiu was an art of reversal? That you had to make your devotion look like inconvenience, your service look like selfishness, your love look like anything other than what it was?

The barrier fell. Ancient protections, layered deep, the work of decades.

It lasted four seconds.

Binghe knew that Shizun hummed when he thought he was completely alone—a melody from nowhere he could identify. Not any song from the peaks, not any tune the disciples learned. Just Shizun's melody. Private and strange and utterly his.

Binghe had memorized every note.

Had hummed it in the Abyss when the darkness pressed too close, when the hunger and isolation threatened to swallow him whole. Had hummed it under his breath while he walked through landscapes that wanted to kill him, while he fought creatures that should have torn him apart, while he lay bleeding in corners waiting for his body to knit itself back together.

And if another demon heard it—if any creature in that hellscape caught even a fragment of that melody—Binghe killed them.

Without hesitation. Without mercy. Without even the pretense of self-defense.

Because it was *his*. The only piece of Shizun he had left, the only secret he'd managed to carry into the dark, and he would not *share* it. Would not let any other ears hold what belonged to him alone. That melody had been a thread connecting him to something beyond the endless nightmare. Binghe guarded it with blood and violence, had added bodies to the Abyss's death count for the crime of *hearing* something that was *his*.

Tianlang-Jun had touched Shizun's wrist for a handful of heartbeats and thought that was intimacy.

Binghe had *years*. Years of mornings and evenings and quiet hours between. Years of learning what Shizun looked like when he was truly exhausted—the particular curl of his fingers in sleep, the way his brow finally smoothed when he stopped performing consciousness.

He knew things about Shizun that Shizun didn't know about himself.

The seventeenth barrier loomed ahead.

Binghe didn't slow down.

The alcove.

The thought hit him like Xin Mo through the chest—sharp and bright and impossible to ignore. He'd seen it again before going to the command center, had stood in that hidden room with his heart in his throat because next to the ones of that man, the demon emperor Shizun had apparently loved before Binghe was even born was—

Him.

Newer paintings made after he fell into the Abyss of a young disciple offering tea, head bowed—and Binghe remembered that morning, remembered the brush of Shizun's fingers against his. A sculpture capturing a laugh. A watercolor of someone sleeping against a doorframe, and Binghe remembered waking to a blanket over his shoulders, remembered the shadow of Shizun's robes disappearing around the corner.

Shizun had painted *him*.

He had been watching him. The whole time. Had seen him clearly enough to capture the exact way his hair curled at the temples in the summer versus the way it looked in the winter, the angle of his jaw when he looked up from his work.

And he had added Binghe to that sacred space. Had placed him alongside whatever ghost still lived in his heart as something that *also* mattered. Something worth preserving.

The seventeenth barrier met Xin Mo and *screamed*.

My devotion earned that place.

Dark energy poured from the blade, wild and hungry and absolutely beyond control.

Years of service. Years of patience. Years of wanting and never asking for more than I was given.

And Shizun painted me into the place where he keeps the secrets of his heart.

The barrier buckled. Fractured. Began to collapse.

Tianlang-Jun can offer charm. Can offer a week of smiles and discussion and whatever else made Shizun blush like that—

Cracks spreading, ancient protections failing, decades of work dissolving under the onslaught —

But my devotion put me in that alcove.

My years. My sacrifice. My refusal to give up even when he pushed me into hell.

I EARNED my place there.

The barrier *shattered*.

Reality folded open and Binghe plunged through, barely registering the transition. His blood was roaring. His hands were shaking. Xin Mo pulsed at his hip like a second heartbeat, feeding on the chaos inside him, and he didn't care.

Let it feed. Let it gorge. He had enough desperation to fuel a hundred demonic swords.

"Please, Binghe."

Shizun's voice. Thin and fragile. *Asking* for him.

The spiritual signature pulled at him like a hook in his chest. Close. So close. After hours of watching through that scrying array, helpless, *burning*—

Binghe moved through the estate without seeing it. Elegant architecture, carefully maintained gardens—none of it registered. Just the pull of that signature. Just the need to *get there*.

"I'm waiting for you."

He was close now. Could feel Shizun's presence like warmth against his skin, like the first ray of sun after three years in the dark. The signature led him through moonlit courtyards, past arrangements of flowers he didn't notice, toward a building that glowed with soft lamplight—

And then he caught the scent.

Shizun's scent. The faint trace of spiritual herbs and ink and something underneath that was simply *him*—the scent Binghe had memorized years ago, had carried with him into the Abyss like a talisman against the dark.

But threaded through it now, woven into the fabric of it like an invasion—

Sandalwood.

His father's scent. On Shizun's skin. In his clothes. In his *hair*.

Binghe's feet stopped moving. His hands curled into fists so tight his claws drew blood from his own palms.

They hadn't—Tianlang-Jun had said goodnight, had left Shizun alone, the scrying array had shown that much before it cut out—but the scent was *everywhere*. Days of proximity. Shared meals and borrowed robes and the casual intimacy of a host and his honored guest.

Shizun smelled like Tianlang-Jun's home.

Like he *belonged* here.

Something howled in Binghe's chest—not rage, not quite, but something rawer. The animal recognition of another predator's scent on territory that should have been *his*.

And beneath the sandalwood, beneath the invasion, he could feel something else. The particular quality of Shizun's spiritual energy when he was anxious. The slight elevation that meant his heart was racing. The tension that meant—

Shizun was worried.

Not the calm of a man at peace with his circumstances. Not the relaxation of someone who had found a place he wanted to stay.

Worried.

About what? About Binghe tearing through the barriers? About what would happen when he arrived? About—

About me.

The howling thing in his chest shifted. Softened. Became something almost like hope.

Shizun was worried about *him*. About what Binghe would do, what he would say, what he would *be* when he finally arrived. That wasn't the anxiety of a man who wanted to be left alone with his charming kidnapper. That was the anxiety of someone bracing for an impact they couldn't predict.

You're afraid of me, Shizun.

The thought should have been devastating. Would have been, once.

But Binghe had spent three years in hell learning that fear wasn't the same as rejection. That someone could be terrified of you and still *want* you. That the man who had pushed him into the Abyss had also painted him into a hidden alcove and pressed his hand to a scrying mirror and said *please*.

"I'm still here."

He was close enough now to see the lamplight flickering through rice-paper screens. Close enough to feel the shift in Shizun's energy as awareness prickled—the instinctive recognition that something was approaching, something powerful, something that made the very air taste like ozone and intent.

"I'm waiting for you."

Ten steps to the door. Eight. Five.

"Come find me."

The anxiety in Shizun's energy spiked. He knew. He *knew* Binghe was here, was right outside, was about to—

"Please, Binghe."

Binghe's hand closed around the door frame.

For one heartbeat, he let himself feel it all. The rage and the longing and the desperate, clawing need that had driven him across three realms. The memory of Shizun's voice saying his name like a prayer. The scent of sandalwood that made him want to tear something apart and the scent underneath that made him want to fall to his knees and never get up.

The alcove. The new paintings of him as a young disciple. The proof that his devotion had *mattered*.

And the certainty—rooted in his very core, unshakeable, forged in three years of darkness—that he had *earned* his place in Shizun's heart.

I won't let anyone take that from us.

Not Tianlang-Jun with his madness-addled delusions and his grasping hands and his offers of dual cultivation served up like festival dishes. Not the faded ghost of the figure his Shizun had captured in those older paintings. Not even Shizun's own fear, his own confusion, the weight of everything that had gone wrong between them.

Especially not someone who's only infatuated with a story.

Because that's what Tianlang-Jun had, wasn't it? Not love—not real love, not the kind that knew what page of what book Shizun read when he couldn't sleep, or what his breathing sounded like when Without a Cure was flaring, or how his whole face changed when he forgot to perform composure.

Tianlang-Jun was in love with an *idea*. A story he couldn't even remember, pieced together from fragments and delusions.

He didn't know Shizun.

He didn't *deserve* Shizun.

And Binghe was done letting him pretend otherwise.

The air around him crackled with demonic energy. Xin Mo shrieked with hunger, with satisfaction, with the pure joy of finally being unleashed. The carefully cultivated mask of the tragic young master burned away entirely, leaving only the truth underneath.

A monster who had learned tenderness for exactly one person.

A demon who had kept his body untouched because it had only ever belonged to one master.

A creature forged in darkness and desperate love, dangerous to everything in the three realms except the one man he would destroy himself to protect.

I earned my place, Shizun.

Wood splintered under his grip.

You painted me into your heart with your own hands.

The door screamed as it tore from its hinges.

And I am NEVER letting anyone take that away from us.

He stepped through the ruined entrance, demonic energy pouring off him in waves, Xin Mo blazing at his hip—

And finally, *finally*, after days of not knowing where his reason for being was, hours of staring at the proof he had earned a place in his Shizun's heart, and minutes of tearing through impossible barriers and years of wanting so badly it had become the shape of his entire existence—

He saw Shizun's face.

Chapter End Notes

TLJ: I would deny you nothing
LBH: I killed anyone who heard a melody that reminded me of you

TLJ's devotion is warm, generous, and effortless—"I give you everything, including the freedom to walk away. Because I trust you'll stay."
LBH holds his affections like something sacred—"I earned this with years of devotion and I will destroy anyone who tries to take it."

TLJ is the charming king who offers you the world and waits, unhurried, for you to realize you want to stay. LBH is the monster who would burn that world down and then kneel in the ashes, waiting to be told he's allowed to stay. One gives you freedom. The other gives you the only soft thing he has—and he's been keeping it safe for you in a chest full of violence.

Two very fundamentally different ways of looking at love. Which one makes your heart do the thing?

Chapter 19: The Truth

Chapter Notes

So chapter count increased again because everyone had too many feelings. I had too many feelings. We all have too many feelings now.

Me: Okay this scene is done.
TLJ: But what if I made another quip—
LBH: I have more accusations—
SQQ: I haven't even started panicking yet—
Me: Please stop…
Narrator: They did not stop.

Huge thank you to everyone leaving kudos and comments! I wish I could reply to every single comment, but just know that I AM reading them all and laughing at inappropriate times and places. Your reactions give me life. 💜

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dimensional barriers were screaming.

Tianlang-Jun set down his tea cup, tilting his head as the estate's ancient arrays shuddered through their foundations. He could feel each barrier as it fell—a distant snap of power, like threads being cut one by one. The tea in his cup rippled with each impact.

Someone was tearing through the spatial distortions like claws through paper screens—each barrier lasting barely long enough to register before it was gone.

Ah, he thought. *That would be little Binghe.*

He rose from his reading chair, adjusting his robes with the unhurried grace of someone who had faced considerably worse than an angry son. He had been alerted when the furthest dimensional barrier fell several minutes ago, and he'd been counting down, curious to see how quickly the boy would carve his way through seventeen layers of protection.

The answer: impressively fast. Almost worth admiring, if it weren't so inconvenient.

Tianlang-Jun made his way down the corridor with measured steps to Shen Qingqiu's quarters, already composing the appropriate dramatic framing for this moment.

He knocked. Waited. Pushed the door open when a soft voice bade him enter.

Shen Qingqiu stood by the window, silhouette tense against the pale light. He turned as Tianlang-Jun entered.

"You have a guest arriving," Tianlang-Jun said, leaning against the doorframe with studied casualness. "Luo Binghe is currently tearing through the dimensional barriers with all the subtlety of a lovesick earthquake. I estimate three minutes before he reaches us."

Shen Qingqiu's reaction was immediate and fascinating.

The color drained from his face. His hand went to his chest. His qi flickered, unstable in a way that spoke of strong emotion poorly contained.

"He's—" Shen Qingqiu's voice caught. "Already?"

"You sound surprised." Tianlang-Jun tilted his head, noting the way Shen Qingqiu's body had gone taut as a bowstring.

"I thought—" A sharp exhale. "I don't know what I thought."

Interesting.

Tianlang-Jun filed the observation away. He'd watched Shen Qingqiu relax into scholarly debate, had seen him revel in the pleasure of intellectual combat. But this—this trembling, desperate thing wearing Shen Qingqiu's face—was someone else entirely.

"You're afraid of him," Tianlang-Jun observed.

"I'm afraid of what happens next." Shen Qingqiu's jaw tightened. His hand pressed harder against his chest. "There are things I never explained. Things he believes that aren't—"

The estate shook. Distantly, something ancient and protective gave up its ghost with a sound like crystal shattering.

"Twelve barriers down," Tianlang-Jun noted. "Five to go. Whatever you're worried about, I suggest you compose yourself quickly."

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes. Drew a breath. When he opened them again, the mask was back in place—cool, elegant, the perfect picture of immortal composure. The transformation was seamless. Exquisite, really. Tianlang-Jun had observed master courtiers struggle for decades to achieve what Shen Qingqiu managed in a single exhale.

Magnificent, he thought, and meant it.

The door tore from its hinges with a shriek of tortured wood, flying across the room to shatter against the far wall.

Luo Binghe stepped through the ruined frame like reality itself had decided to get out of his way. His robes were torn, his hair wild, and that cursed sword blazed in his hand—pouring dark energy into the air like smoke from a funeral pyre. The blade's ravenous hunger pressed against Tianlang-Jun's senses.

But Tianlang-Jun barely spared a glance for the sword, or for the impressive display of power crackling around the young demon's form.

He was watching Shen Qingqiu.

How will you react to him, I wonder? he thought. *Show me something true. I want to understand the shape of what lives in your heart.*

Tianlang-Jun had spent a week studying Shen Qingqiu.

He'd had reason to believe there was something between them—the alcove Zhuzhi-Lang had described, that hidden studio filled with years of artwork. Sculptures and paintings of a demon emperor rendered with such tenderness, such attention.

The pieces had seemed to fit. A lover from before the madness. Someone his fractured mind had forgotten but his heart still remembered. When Tianlang-Jun's sanity had first begun knitting itself back together, he'd latched onto that possibility like a lifeline. *Perhaps there was someone before Su Xiyan. Someone kind. Someone you abandoned as Luo Binghe accused.*

So he'd observed Shen Qingqiu carefully this past week, looking for confirmation. For the echoes of old intimacy. For some spark of recognition beneath the wariness.

What he'd found was something else entirely.

Because Shen Qingqiu was *fascinating*.

Not just beautiful, though he was certainly that. Tianlang-Jun had known beautiful people before—had bedded many and forgotten most of them. Beauty alone didn't hold his attention. Beauty was common in three realms.

But Shen Qingqiu had a *mind*.

Sharp and quick and utterly merciless when it came to bad scholarship. Tianlang-Jun had watched him eviscerate a three-hundred-year-old treatise on spiritual resonance with the casual brutality of a cat dismembering a mouse, and he'd found himself genuinely delighted. Had laughed—really laughed—for the first time in so long. The sound had startled him. He'd almost forgotten what his own laughter sounded like when it wasn't bitter.

And then there was the way Shen Qingqiu forgot himself sometimes. When they argued about array theory, when Tianlang-Jun deliberately provoked him with incorrect assertions just to watch him sputter. The cold, elegant mask would slip, and underneath was someone passionate. Someone who cared, deeply and almost unwillingly, about things most people would find trivial.

He wondered how many other topics sparked that hidden fire. What else might make Shen Qingqiu's careful composure crack open to reveal the furnace beneath. He could imagine decades of discovery, peeling back layer after layer, finding new things to argue about just to watch that mask slip. New ways to make him forget to be cold. New moments of genuine feeling breaking through like sunlight through clouds.

The thought had startled him with its intensity. *Decades*. He was thinking in decades, planning a future, wanting something more than the immediate satisfaction of clever conversation.

Tianlang-Jun had found himself looking forward to their discussions, thinking about Shen Qingqiu during the quiet hours, wondering what he would say about this text or that theory. Had caught himself smiling at nothing, remembering a particularly vicious turn of phrase.

When had debate with Shen Qingqiu become the highlight of his days? When had he started measuring time by conversations—*three hours until dinner, until I can see him again*—like some lovesick youth?

I could love him, he'd thought, just two days ago. *Given time. Given the chance.*

It had been a strange realization. Gentle, almost. Like finding a door he hadn't known existed. Like discovering a room in his own heart that had been locked for so long he'd forgotten it was there—and finding it furnished with possibility, dusty but intact, waiting to be inhabited again.

For the first time since madness had consumed his mind, since betrayal had hollowed him out and left only rage and bitterness, something warm had stirred in his chest. Something that looked at Shen Qingqiu's sharp tongue and sharper mind and thought: *Yes. This. I could want this for a very long time.*

He hadn't decided whether to walk through that door yet. There was still his revenge to consider. Still a visceral rage that couldn't simply be set aside because a sharp-tongued cultivator made him laugh.

But he'd been... considering it. Turning the possibility over in his mind like a smooth stone, feeling its weight and texture.

And now Luo Binghe was here, and Shen Qingqiu was—

Shen Qingqiu was looking at Luo Binghe.

Tianlang-Jun had flirted with Shen Qingqiu for a week. Had touched his hand, his shoulder, his hair. Had made him smile, made him blush, made him forget his words. The blushes Tianlang-Jun had earned were pretty—flustered, charming, the reactions of a man caught off-guard by attention. He'd considered that a victory—proof of the connection between them.

But this? This was different from the way he'd looked at Tianlang-Jun during their week together. This was something else. Something that made his observational instincts sharpen to a fine point.

Tianlang-Jun stepped forward, positioning himself at an angle where he could observe them both. Not quite between them—not yet. But close enough to see every flicker of reaction.

"Ah," he said, adjusting a fold of his robe with studied casualness as Luo Binghe's gaze swept across them. "You found us."

The *us* landed exactly as he'd intended.

He tracked his son's nostrils flare—demon senses cataloguing everything. The week of shared meals and borrowed robes. The sandalwood that had woven itself through Shen Qingqiu's scent. The proximity, the domesticity.

"Shizun."

The word came out of Luo Binghe like it had been torn from somewhere deep. Wild and aching in a way that made Tianlang-Jun raise an eyebrow.

Ah, he thought. *That's not how a disciple addresses a teacher.*

Interesting. Very interesting.

Then Luo Binghe's gaze dropped to Shen Qingqiu's robes—and froze.

Tianlang-Jun noted his son's expression cycle through recognition, confusion, and something that looked very much like dawning outrage. The jade-green silk, the silver embroidery at the collar and cuffs, the cut that was distinctly not Qing Jing Peak's austere aesthetic.

"Those robes," Luo Binghe said, his voice dangerously soft.

Tianlang-Jun smiled. "His own were quite damaged by the time Zhuzhi-Lang brought him to me. Torn, bloodied. I couldn't very well leave him in that state. A guest deserves proper hospitality."

Shen Qingqiu's hand went to his collar in a gesture that was probably unconscious. "He—they were the most comfortable option available. Given my limited wardrobe during this... extended visit."

"Comfortable." Luo Binghe's teeth clenched. His gaze swung to Tianlang-Jun with murder written in every line of his body. "You dressed him. You've been dressing my Shizun. Touching him. Putting your hands on—"

"Binghe." Shen Qingqiu's voice was sharp. "It's not like that. He was just being—"

"What?" Luo Binghe turned to him, and underneath the jealousy there was something wounded. Something unguarded. "Hospitable? Generous?" His gaze dropped to the robes again, lingering on where the fabric draped against Shen Qingqiu's collarbones. "These are demon court formal wear." His jaw went hard. "He didn't just give you clothes, Shizun. He dressed you in his own formal robes as if you were his consort."

"I offered him appropriate attire for a guest of his station." Tianlang-Jun's tone was mild, deliberately mild, the kind of mildness that could drive a person to violence.

Shen Qingqiu's ears had gone faintly pink. "You said they were casual robes!"

Tianlang-Jun tilted his head, the picture of innocence. "Casual formal robes. There's a distinction."

"THERE IS NOT A DISTINCTION—"

"Oh, but there is." Tianlang-Jun's grin widened. He was enjoying this far more than he should—the flush climbing Shen Qingqiu's neck, the murder in his son's eyes, the delicious tension crackling between them all. It was like watching a play where he was both audience and actor. "Court formal requires at least three additional layers and ceremonial accessories. What you're wearing is merely... intimate formal. Reserved for private audiences. Close companions." He let his gaze linger on Shen Qingqiu's face. "Favored guests."

He could practically taste the jealousy rolling off his son—thick and hot and utterly revealing.

Fascinating, he thought. *So possessive. So territorial. This isn't about the robes at all, is it? You're not angry that I dressed him—you're angry that I got to care for him. That I wove myself into the fabric of his days.*

Luo Binghe's hand tightened on Xin Mo's hilt until his knuckles went white.

"You stole my Shizun."

Luo Binghe's voice had gone cold, the rage crystallizing into something sharper, more focused.

Tianlang-Jun's expression softened into something almost fond. "Stole? No, little emperor. You gave him to me."

Luo Binghe went still.

"You came to my prison—so passionate, so determined—and told me everything. His name. His nature. Your plans for him." Tianlang-Jun's smile was radiant, genuinely delighted. "And your scheme was inspired—truly, I mean that. I simply couldn't resist borrowing it."

He studied how his son's face contorted—guilt and fury and the frantic need to justify.

You would have let him suffer, Tianlang-Jun thought. *That was the plan, wasn't it? Let the world hurt him just enough that you could sweep in as savior. You wanted him to need you more than you wanted him to be safe.*

It was almost impressive, in a terrible way. The depth of that obsession. The ruthlessness of that love.

"Think of it as a compliment," he said aloud. "Imitation and flattery, and all that."

"Shizun, I wasn't—I didn't—"

"I especially enjoyed writing the love letters," Tianlang-Jun added, warming to the subject. "They're very passionate. Very torrid." His eyes sparkled. "Zhuzhi-Lang tells me they've become quite popular in the cultivation world. I hear there are factions."

The air in the room changed.

"You were going to frame me?" Shen Qingqiu's voice was flat, but there was no real heat in it. Not the way there should have been if this were truly a betrayal.

Tianlang-Jun observed Shen Qingqiu's face—and there was the reaction he'd been waiting for. Not shock. Not disbelief. The Seer's expression flickered through anger, exasperation, and resignation.

How peculiar. As if this revelation wasn't news to him at all. As if he'd known exactly what Luo Binghe was capable of, and had accepted it long ago.

Demons were prone to obsess. That much was simply their nature—Tianlang-Jun knew it well enough from the inside. The hunger that lived in demonic blood didn't understand moderation. It wanted what it wanted with a ferocity that could consume everything in its path, and Heavenly Demons were the worst of all. Their love was a conquering thing, a claiming thing. It built palaces and burned cities. It couldn't help itself.

He had been that way once. Before his imprisonment had taught him what it meant to grasp at something so singlemindedly only to feel it crumble. Before madness had shown him the shape of his own desperation from the outside.

Now he thought he would rather be abandoned than betrayed. Would rather offer an open hand than a closed fist. Would rather have someone stay because they chose to, not because he'd left them nowhere else to go.

It was, perhaps, the only wisdom imprisonment had given him.

Looking at his son now—at the desperate, grasping hunger in those crimson eyes—Tianlang-Jun saw himself as he'd once been. And he wasn't sure whether to pity the boy or envy him. There was a kind of purity in wanting something that badly. A kind of terrible freedom.

He'd lost that somewhere along the way. Wasn't sure he wanted it back.

Luo Binghe flinched. "I was going to rescue you! Clear your name eventually! I just needed you to—" His voice broke. "To need me. To have no one else to turn to. I was going to be there. I would never have let them truly hurt you—"

"And yet they did." Tianlang-Jun's voice went soft.

Luo Binghe's head snapped toward him.

"All that power," Tianlang-Jun continued, beginning to circle. He moved with the unhurried grace of a predator, letting each step carry him closer. "All that influence you've been building. I hear you've taken control of Huan Hua Palace itself and that it took you less than an hour—quite the accomplishment. The very sect that orchestrated my downfall, now dancing to my son's tune." He let his smile sharpen. "All of that, and he still wasn't safe there."

Luo Binghe's grip on Xin Mo had turned bloodless. The blade keened with barely-contained fury.

"Yes, I planted the evidence. I set this in motion." Tianlang-Jun spread his hands, utterly unrepentant. "But you were right there. You had every resource, every connection, every ounce of influence a man could want—and Shen Qingqiu still ended up bleeding in a cell."

The words hung in the air like a blade.

"So spare me your outrage about who took him first." Tianlang-Jun met his son's eyes. "I kept him safe."

Tianlang-Jun tracked the guilt and rage war across his son's features—the fury at being read so accurately, the aching need to explain, to justify.

"I didn't know—"

"So don't look at me like I'm the monster here," Tianlang-Jun said softly. "I may have put him in danger. But you're the one who failed to keep him safe."

The words burrowed in. His son's hands shook with the effort of not attacking.

All that power, he thought, observing his son's composure fracture. *All that obsessive devotion. And when it mattered most, you couldn't protect the one thing you actually cared about.*

It was almost pitiful. Almost familiar.

Something bitter twisted in his chest. He thought of his own blindness. His own failures to see what was right in front of him. Before everything. Before Su Xiyan—

The thought soured in his mouth.

"Your faithless mother would be so proud," he heard himself say. The words came out colder than he'd intended. "Her son, master of Huan Hua Palace—does it feel like coming home?"

Luo Binghe went rigid.

"To walk the halls where she schemed against me? To sit in the seat of the sect that helped seal me beneath a mountain?" Tianlang-Jun's mouth twisted. "Blood will out, I suppose. She betrayed me for them. It only makes sense that her son would follow in her footsteps."

"You're wrong."

The words split through the room like thunder.

Tianlang-Jun stilled. That wasn't rage in his son's voice—or, not only rage. There was something else. Something exposed and almost pleading.

"She wasn't faithless." Luo Binghe's expression hardened into something cold and deliberate. "I gave the Old Palace Master a truth serum. I know what really happened. I know what they did to her. He told me everything. *Everything*."

The room went silent. Even Xin Mo's hungry pulse seemed to fade.

Tianlang-Jun felt his expression sharpen into something assessing. Careful. A story he had played in his mind over and over again until he had tired of it suddenly had an exciting new plot twist. How convenient. How *narratively satisfying*—the faithless betrayer revealed to be a tragic heroine all along. The kind of reversal that happened in the third act of romance novels, right before the grand reconciliation.

Too convenient to be true.

And yet.

He watched his son's face—the barely contained fury, the raw edge beneath the cold delivery—and searched for the lie. The angle. The manipulation. Luo Binghe was clever; Tianlang-Jun had seen that much. Clever enough to craft a story designed to destabilize, to rewrite the narrative in his favor.

But there was no calculation in those burning eyes. No careful performance. Just a young man who had learned something terrible and didn't know what to do with it except throw it like a weapon.

He believes it, Tianlang-Jun realized. *Whatever the Old Palace Master told him—he believes every word.*

That didn't make it true, of course. Truth serums could be resisted. Memories could be false. The Old Palace Master might have his own reasons for spinning this particular tale—

"She loved you," Luo Binghe said. "She wasn't playing a role. She wasn't gathering intelligence. She loved you, and when she got pregnant, Huan Hua gave her a choice."

"What choice?" Tianlang-Jun heard himself ask. His voice sounded strange. Distant. He hadn't meant to ask. Hadn't meant to give ground so easily. But the question had slipped out before he could catch it, drawn by something deeper than strategy.

"Abort the demon's child, or die." Luo Binghe's laugh was hollow. "She chose death. She chose me over her own life, over her sect, over everything. The Old Palace Master confessed it himself—if she'd just agreed to end the pregnancy, she would have lived." His eyes met Tianlang-Jun's, burning. "She died because she loved you. And you've spent all this time believing she betrayed you."

It's a trick, Tianlang-Jun told himself. *A ploy. He's trying to unbalance you, to make you question everything so he can—*

But question everything *how*? To what end? If Luo Binghe wanted to manipulate him, surely there were easier ways than this. Surely the boy would spin a tale that served his interests—that painted *himself* as the wronged party, that gave him leverage.

This story didn't give Luo Binghe anything except a mother who had loved him enough to die for him.

And a father who had spent almost two decades hating her for it.

She wasn't faithless.

The thought slid between his ribs and lodged there, sharp and immovable. Tianlang-Jun felt years of bitter conviction shudder beneath him like ground that had never been as solid as he'd believed.

She loved you.

No. No, that couldn't be right. He had been so *certain*. Certainty had been the only thing that made the sealing survivable—knowing that he had been wronged, that his hatred was justified, that at least he understood what had happened to him.

He'd replayed every memory, reexamined every moment, found the lies woven through all of it. The way she'd smiled at him—performance. The way she'd trembled in his arms—calculated vulnerability. The way she'd whispered his name in the dark like it meant something—

What if it had meant something?

For a long moment, Tianlang-Jun couldn't breathe.

"Well," he said, and his voice emerged oddly light. Almost airy. "And here I thought she only loved me for my body."

Both of them were staring at him now.

His hand found the wall. He hadn't meant to reach for it—hadn't realized he needed the support until his palm was pressed flat against cool stone. The room had gone strange around the edges. Soft. Like a dream he was about to wake from.

"That changes things," He heard himself say it from somewhere far away, as if watching a play of his own life.

Tianlang-Jun was distantly aware that he should be doing something—responding, reacting, performing the appropriate emotion for this moment. But his mind had gone very quiet. Very still. Like the surface of a pond after a stone has sunk to the bottom.

The room swayed. Or perhaps Tianlang-Jun did.

The foundations of his understanding—years of bitter certainty, of rage nursed in darkness, of hatred so familiar it had become like a second skin—crumbled.

She didn't betray me?

She loved me?

The thought echoed through the hollow place where his heart should be.

She chose death rather than destroy the child we'd created together.

And he had hated her for it. Had built his entire existence around avenging himself on the memory of a woman who had never been his enemy.

"The cultivation world killed her," Luo Binghe said. "The righteous sects murdered a woman for loving the wrong person and keeping the wrong child." His voice went flat. "So don't talk to me about faithlessness. You abandoned someone who loved you for her. And then she died protecting the child you never came back for. And you don't even remember him!"

Tianlang-Jun looked up. Found his son staring at him with an accusation that burned.

"Shen Qingqiu gave you everything," Luo Binghe said. "Loved you for years. And you didn't even remember his name."

The accusation should have stung. Would have, perhaps, if Tianlang-Jun's mind hadn't snagged on something else entirely.

He was still reeling from the truth about Su Xiyan—could still feel it reshaping everything he thought he knew—but some part of him had never stopped watching. Never stopped cataloguing. The pieces were beginning to shift. He wasn't sure yet what picture they'd form—but he was starting to suspect it wasn't the one he'd been assuming.

"You're right," Tianlang-Jun said slowly. "I don't remember him."

Luo Binghe's expression hardened.

"But I know what he made." Tianlang-Jun's voice had lost its theatrical edge, settling into something softer. "Zhuzhi-Lang described the hidden alcove to me. Years of work—a demon emperor rendered in clay and canvas with the kind of tenderness that leaves fingerprints on the soul. That kind of devotion doesn't come from looking. It comes from longing. From years of holding someone in your heart until your hands learn to speak what your mouth cannot." He paused. "It comes from aching. From wanting something so deeply that you have to give the feeling somewhere to live."

A flush crept up Shen Qingqiu's neck. He shifted, clearly uncomfortable, and his hand made an aborted reach for his fan. The specific embarrassment of a craftsman whose private work was being laid bare for discussion.

"But I know—" Luo Binghe's voice broke.

Tianlang-Jun studied his son as he stepped forward, his powerful hands clenched into shaking fists. The mask of the demon emperor had slipped entirely, leaving something stripped bare underneath. Something young.

"I *earned* my place. The newer paintings—the ones you made after I fell. I saw them, Shizun. Dozens of them."

Luo Binghe's breath had gone ragged. His eyes were too bright—fever-bright, the shine of someone holding back tears through sheer force of will.

"You painted me from memory. Every angle. Every expression. The way I held my sword when I was tired. The face I made when I waited for you to taste my cooking." A sound escaped him—half laugh, half sob—and Tianlang-Jun found himself unexpectedly moved by the nakedness of it. "You captured moments I didn't even know you were watching. And you *kept* them. All those years I was in the Abyss, you—"

He couldn't seem to finish. His whole body had begun to tremble—fine shivers running through that powerful frame like he might shake apart at the seams.

"You mourned me," Luo Binghe whispered. "You thought I was dead and you *mourned* me. You painted me like you were trying to remember every breath I ever took."

Tianlang-Jun observed the demon emperor—conqueror of realms, master of Xin Mo, terror of the cultivation world—stand before his former teacher and shake with the aching need to be told it was true.

Tianlang-Jun studied Shen Qingqiu's face—and *there it was*.

He'd seen Shen Qingqiu react to mentions of his secret artwork before. The embarrassment of being caught, yes—the flush of a secret exposed. But underneath that, Tianlang-Jun had always caught a flicker of something else. Pride. The quiet satisfaction of an artist who knows his work is good.

But this was something else entirely. Shen Qingqiu's whole body folded slightly, like he'd been struck somewhere soft. His fingers pressed white-knuckled against his robes, over his heart.

This was grief.

"But that doesn't make sense," Tianlang-Jun said.

Both of them turned to look at him.

"Your Shizun is a Seer, isn't he?" His mind was still rearranging pieces, building the new picture from the rubble of the old. "Prophetic visions. Glimpses of the future."

Luo Binghe went still. "What?"

"You didn't know." It wasn't a question. Tianlang-Jun tucked that away—another piece of the puzzle. "Interesting. I would have thought he'd told you, given everything else."

"Shizun can—" Luo Binghe turned to look at Shen Qingqiu, something new flickering behind his eyes. "You can see the future?"

He stopped. Tianlang-Jun watched the implications cascade across his son's face.

"Shen Qingqiu knew you'd survive." Tianlang-Jun tilted his head, piecing it together even as he spoke. "A Seer would know. So what was he mourning?"

He looked at Shen Qingqiu with new eyes. Saw the way those green eyes kept flickering to Luo Binghe even when they shouldn't—helpless, hungry glances that Shen Qingqiu probably didn't even realize he was making. Saw the hand pressed against his chest like he was trying to hold something in. Saw the grief that lived underneath the elegant mask, the soft distance, the ache behind the eyes. And when Shen Qingqiu turned to look at Luo Binghe—really looked—the expression of loss was so profound that Tianlang-Jun felt it echo in his own chest.

"Unless," Tianlang-Jun continued, watching both of them now—the way Shen Qingqiu's breath had gone shallow and the way Luo Binghe's brow had furrowed in confusion, "he wasn't mourning your death at all, hmm?" He paused, letting the question hang. Then, softer: "And what, I wonder, is he still grieving now?"

Why does Shen Qingqiu look as if he's still losing something?

He watched Shen Qingqiu's face as he continued—watched the devastation spread like fractures through ice.

"I couldn't forget." The words tumbled out of Shen Qingqiu, ragged and desperate. "I'd close my eyes and see your hands, the way your hair fell when you were concentrating, the way you'd light up when I praised you, and I couldn't—I had to put it somewhere, I had to keep it, or I'd lose it entirely—"

"What does that mean?" Luo Binghe's voice came out hoarse. "Shizun—what are you saying?"

"You were trying to keep something precious. Something you knew you'd have to let go. The connection. You were grieving someone you thought would never forgive you. You were mourning what you'd lose—the disciple who trusted you, who smiled at you without fear, who looked at you like you'd hung the—"

"*Stop*."

The word came out ragged. Shen Qingqiu's voice broke on it, and something in his careful composure finally shattered.

"Please," he said, barely above a whisper. "Don't."

Shen Qingqiu was looking at Luo Binghe like he couldn't help it. Like his whole body had forgotten how to do anything else. Like the rest of the world had simply ceased to exist.

Ah, Tianlang-Jun thought, and felt something quiet shift in his chest. *So that's how it is*.

The realization struck him like a Black Moon Rhinoceros-Python at full charge—sudden and devastating, the world reordering itself around a truth he should have seen from the beginning.

"A Seer who painted his beloved's future." The words landed somewhere between revelation and resignation. "That would explain everything, wouldn't it?" Tianlang-Jun understood now.

The pieces had fallen into place with terrible clarity.

He was quiet for a moment. Then his mouth curved—not quite a smile, but something wry and wondering.

"What a magnificent twist," he murmured, his voice taking on the appreciative tone of a scholar encountering an elegant proof. "The secret alcove, the years of devotion, the demon emperor rendered in loving detail—and it was the son all along. Not the father." He shook his head slowly. "The dramatic irony is exquisite. I never saw it coming."

He looked at Luo Binghe with something that might have been rueful admiration.

"I would have given myself a better role," he added. "But I can appreciate the artistry." The words came out light. Easy. Humor had always been easier than honesty.

He paused, something tugging at the corner of his mouth. It wanted to be a smile. It wasn't quite managing.

"I do hope I was at least a *compelling* obstacle. It would be tragic to learn I was merely a convenient one." A beat. "Though one could argue he's been painting my hair this whole time. Just... attached to a different head."

Chapter End Notes

LBH: She chose death over losing your child.
TLJ: Well obviously. Have you seen me?
TLJ, solving the mystery himself: Oh. It was him all along.
TLJ: ...
TLJ: I mean, he had to get the hair from somewhere. I'll take what credit I can.

TLJ's coping mechanisms, ranked:
1. Humor
2. Pretending everything is a romance novel
3. More humor
4. Actually processing his emotions (has never been attempted)

Chapter 20: You Saw Me

Chapter Notes

> We've reached the chapter I've been building toward since the beginning, and I'm genuinely emotional about it. Thank you all for coming on this journey of escalating misunderstandings and dramatic irony with me.
>
> And thank you all so much for the comments and kudos! Reading your comments is like the best worst dopamine addiction.
>
> Now. Deep breath. Here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And it was the son all along. Not the father."

Luo Binghe's mind caught on the words like cloth on a nail.

He had been fifteen when he'd found that hidden alcove. Fifteen and desperate and so hungry for any scrap of Shizun's inner world that he'd crept into places he had no right to be. And then he'd seen them—images on paper and silk of a powerful figure with crimson eyes and a demon mark, rendered with such tenderness that Binghe's heart had cracked down the middle.

He remembered going back. And back. And back.

He'd stood in that alcove for hours, memorizing every brushstroke, cataloguing every loving detail, torturing himself with the evidence of Shizun's devotion to someone else. Pressed his fingers to the canvases when he was sure no one would catch him, tracing the lines Shizun's hands had made. Binghe remembered the sick, twisting jealousy that had coiled in his gut—*who is this, who is he to you, why do you paint him with such tenderness?*

He'd made himself ill with it. Had lain awake constructing histories, imagining Shizun young and in love with some powerful demon, imagining that demon abandoning him, imagining himself as nothing but a pale echo of someone Shizun actually wanted. Had dreamed of burning every painting, of smashing every sculpture to dust, and then hated himself for wanting to break something Shizun loved.

He'd spent years trying to identify that figure, the ghost that lived in Shizun's heart where Binghe could never reach. And then years piecing together an elaborate tragedy in his mind—the secret lover, the abandonment, the reason Shizun could never look at Binghe without something complicated in his eyes.

Three years in the Abyss and the jealousy had only grown. Had festered. Had become something monstrous and all-consuming, until Binghe couldn't look at his own reflection without seeing a rival's face staring back.

But it was him.

It had always been him.

Me?

But—no.

The timeline was wrong. The paintings were old. He'd seen them years before his demon blood awakened, before any of this. When he was still just a disciple. Still just a boy trailing after Shizun like a lovesick shadow, pathetic and desperate and so small.

"Those paintings are old," he heard himself say. "You made them before I—"

His voice died. He looked down at his hands.

These hands that had clawed their way out of hell. That had killed and conquered and built an empire on blood and spite and the desperate need to be worthy of someone who'd thrown him away.

But back then? Back then, these hands had trembled when Shizun walked past. Had scrubbed floors and stirred soup and clutched at robes he wasn't supposed to touch. Back then he was just a street rat who got lucky. A helpless disciple with demon blood sleeping in his veins and no idea of the monster it would make him.

He'd been nothing.

"How could they be of me?"

Shizun flinched like Binghe had struck him. His face went bloodless. His hands curled into fists at his sides—the posture of a man with nowhere left to run.

A Seer, Tianlang-Jun had said.

Prophetic visions.

The realization broke over him like a wave.

Oh.

Oh.

"You see the future," Binghe's voice broke. "You saw me. Before I ever—"

He couldn't finish. Couldn't breathe. The world had inverted itself and he was still falling.

Shizun had known. Had always known. Had looked at that hopeless, hungry boy and somehow seen the emperor he would become.

"You saw me."

Wonder crept into Binghe's voice. Fragile. Disbelieving. A glass-spun thing that might shatter if he breathed too hard.

"All of it," he said, and his voice was shaking. "Every painting. Every sculpture. You were painting my future."

"Yes," Shizun whispered. He still wouldn't meet Binghe's eyes.

Yes.

Something burst in Binghe's heart—hope, ragged and aching and agonizing, the kind he'd learned to kill years ago because it hurt too much when it died. He'd strangled that hope with his bare hands. Had buried it so deep he'd forgotten where the grave was.

And now it was clawing its way back up, alive, *alive*, and he couldn't stop it.

It was me.

All those years of anguish. All those nights spent choking on jealousy, convinced he would never be enough, could never compete with the ghost who owned Shizun's heart.

But the ghost was him.

Shizun was painting ME.

It hit like a blow to the chest—no, like falling, like the Abyss opening beneath him all over again except this time he was falling *up*, into light, into something so bright it burned.

Every poisonous whisper— *replacement, echo, second choice, never enough* —crumbling to ash. Every tear he'd shed, every sleepless night, every moment he'd spent hating himself for not being whoever Shizun really wanted—

It was him. It had always been him. Shizun had looked at a boy with nothing and seen someone worth years of secret devotion.

Binghe's knees wanted to buckle. His eyes burned, his hands wouldn't steady, his heart trying to beat out of his chest—he couldn't—he couldn't—

He wanted to weep until he dissolved. Wanted to laugh until his ribs cracked. Wanted to fall at Shizun's feet and press his forehead to the floor and thank him, worship him, promise him everything Binghe had and everything he would ever have.

He wanted to drag Shizun into his arms and never let go. Hold him so tight their bones creaked. So close that their heartbeats synchronized, that their breath mingled, that anyone who tried to separate them would have to carve Binghe apart first.

It was me. Not my father. Not some lost lover from before I was born. Me. You saw ME.

His vision blurred. His whole body felt like it might fly apart at the seams, held together by nothing but the desperate need to understand.

Shizun. Shizun. Shizun.

Shizun was painting ME.

And then—

The thought snagged. Caught on something sharp.

If it was him. If the paintings were always of him—

The hope that had been blazing in his chest flickered. Guttered. Began to curdle into something cold.

"But...if it was me," Binghe said slowly. His voice had gone strange. Distant. Like it was coming from somewhere far away. "If the paintings were always of me..."

He could feel the logic assembling itself. Could feel the conclusion coming like a blade swinging toward his throat.

"Then the Abyss wasn't about my father at all."

Shizun's whole body flinched, violent and instinctive, like Binghe had driven a knife between his ribs. He took two slow steps back as if he could outrun the words before Binghe finished speaking them.

"You didn't push me because I reminded you of someone you lost."

The words tasted like poison. Like all the sweetness of a moment ago rotting on his tongue.

"You knew it was me. You looked at me—painted me—and you still—"

His voice fractured. Fell apart.

"*Why?*"

The word came out broken. A wounded animal sound. The cry of a boy who'd just been handed everything he ever wanted and then watched it turn to ash in his hands.

And Shizun—

Shizun crumpled.

Binghe had seen his teacher face down demons, face down death, face down the entire cultivation world with nothing but a fan and cutting remarks. He had never—not once—seen Shen Qingqiu look like this. The mask didn't slip. It shattered. His face contorted with something raw and agonized, years of careful composure washing away like sand in a flood.

His hand flew to his chest, clutching at his robes, and his whole body curved inward like he was trying to protect a wound.

Shizun. Shizun, no, don't—look like that. I can't—if you look at me like that I'll—

Part of Binghe wanted to go to him. Catch him. Hold him together.

Part of Binghe wanted to shake him until the answers fell out.

"Because I couldn't change it." The words came out destroyed. Wrecked. The voice of a man who had been carrying something unbearable for far too long. "I saw what had to happen. What you had to become. And I couldn't—I couldn't—"

"What I had to become?" Binghe's voice fractured with disbelief. "You pushed me into the Abyss because of something you *saw*?"

Three years. Three years of clawing through hell. Three years of darkness and blood and Xin Mo's whispers drilling into his skull. Three years of surviving on nothing but spite and the image of green eyes behind his eyelids.

And Shizun had *chosen* that for him?

"I saw what happened if I didn't." Shizun's voice was barely audible. "If I tried to protect you from the Abyss, then I would have died. And I—"

He choked. Couldn't finish.

I would have died.

The words echoed in Binghe's skull. Kept echoing. Wouldn't stop.

Shizun saw himself die.

He tried to imagine it. Shizun—his Shizun—watching visions of his own death. Alone, probably. Carrying that knowledge in silence, unable to tell anyone. Knowing what was coming and being powerless to stop it unless—

Unless he pushed his disciple into hell.

If he hadn't pushed me, he would have died.

Binghe's chest went tight. Not with anger—something else. Something that felt horrifyingly like gratitude.

You chose to live. You fought to live. Even if it meant—

The words hit like a blade between the ribs.

"You pushed me so you wouldn't die?" The word came out strange. Almost wondering.

"Yes." The word came out shattered. "I told myself it was inevitable—that you'd fall no matter what—but that's just excuses. I chose to live. I'm a selfish coward who let you fall so I wouldn't have to die."

Shizun looked wrecked. Gutted. Like the confession had carved something vital out of him on the way up.

"I'm sorry. I knew it was selfish, I knew—"

"*Selfish?*" The word came out bewildered. Almost dazed. "You think I would have *wanted* you to die?"

Shizun's head came up.

"I would fall into a *thousand* Abysses if it meant you lived." The words tore out of him, raw and desperate. "I would crawl through every hell in existence and count myself lucky. You think the Abyss was worse than losing you? You think anything could be worse than—"

He broke off.

Losing you? Spending the rest of my miserable existence stretching out with no you in it?

"You could have died? And then I would have clawed my way out of that pit and found *nothing*. No you. Just a world with no point to it—and I would have burned it all down, Shizun. Every realm. Every mountain. Everything. There is no version of me that loses you and stays sane."

"Binghe—that's not—" Shizun looked stricken. "Binghe, you don't understand, the things you suffered down there—"

"I would suffer them all again. Gladly. If it kept you alive."

Binghe meant every word. Would carve them into his own bones if Shizun needed proof. Would go back to the Abyss right now, this moment, if that was the price of Shizun's heartbeat.

"What is three years of darkness compared to a world without you in it? Nothing. Less than nothing."

Shizun stared at him. Something in his expression had given way—wonder and disbelief and the fragile, terrified edge of hope.

Neither of them moved. Neither of them breathed.

"The boy would clearly walk through hell for you," Tianlang-Jun observed from somewhere to the side. Binghe had almost forgotten he was there. "Which makes me wonder—what exactly did you see in those visions that frightened you so badly?"

Shizun went pale.

"I saw..." He stopped. His hand went to his throat—an odd gesture, almost protective. Started again. "There was a future. Where I—"

Another pause. Longer this time. His jaw worked silently, like he was testing words and discarding them. Like he was picking his way through a field of knives.

"Where the demon emperor—" A grimace crossed his face, almost like physical pain. He took a breath. Tried again.

"I saw what you did to the people who betrayed you."

The words landed like ice water.

The people who betrayed you.

And what was pushing your disciple into hell, if not betrayal?

What are you not telling me, Shizun? What can't you tell me?

"And I saw what happened to me," Shizun whispered. "After."

Binghe reached out.

Shizun flinched.

The flinch was small—barely a breath of movement—but Binghe saw it. Felt it like a knife sliding between his ribs.

"You're afraid of me." The words came out hollow. "Even now. After everything. You look at me and you still see—"

"I saw what you did to me after—after you came back. After what I'd done to you."

The world tilted.

You saw me kill you. You've spent all these years waiting for me to—

"You thought I would hurt you." It wasn't a question. "That I could—"

"You have every right. I watched you fall, Binghe. I let it happen." His voice gave out on the last word. He looked shattered. Lost. Like Binghe was speaking a language he'd never learned. "I would have deserved it. That's why I don't understand—how can you—why would you—"

"You think I want to *punish* you?"

"I don't understand how you can even look at me! How you could even—" Shizun's voice came out raw. "In the Water Prison. You kissed me, and I don't understand why—"

Tianlang-Jun murmured something. Something about robes. Bold gestures. Binghe barely registered it.

"*Why?*" Binghe's voice shook. "You keep asking why. Like I need a reason. Like loving you is something I chose instead of something I *am*." The words came out splintered. "Shizun, I would tear myself apart before I let anything hurt you. I would unmake myself piece by piece. But *hurt* you?"

Something between a laugh and a sob escaped him.

"You are my whole heart. You have been since I was fifteen years old. How could you ever think—"

He couldn't continue.

He doesn't believe me.

The thought was unbearable. Binghe had torn himself open—had handed Shizun every raw, desperate truth he had—and still those green eyes watched him like he was waiting for the blow to fall. Like tenderness was just cruelty wearing a softer face.

How do I make you see?

But even as the despair clawed at him, something else surfaced.

A thought. Sharp-edged. Insistent.

If Shizun truly believed Binghe would hurt him—if he'd spent all these years bracing for Binghe's revenge, waiting for the demon emperor to finally collect what he was owed—

Then why the paintings?

Binghe thought of the alcove. The years of work hidden away like treasures. The demon emperor on his throne, rendered with such tenderness that Binghe had wept with jealousy, believing they were meant for someone else. Hundreds of pieces. A shrine built in secret to the very future Shizun claimed to fear.

You didn't build a shrine to your executioner.

Unless—

Beloved, Tianlang-Jun had said. *A Seer who painted his beloved's future.*

The word surfaced like a bubble rising through dark water.

Beloved.

"Tianlang-Jun said something earlier." Binghe's voice came out strange. "When he figured out the paintings were of me."

Shizun went very still.

"He said you painted your beloved's future." Binghe's eyes searched Shizun's face. "*Beloved.*"

Shizun's whole body went rigid. A tremor ran through him—visible, undeniable—and his jaw clenched so hard Binghe could see the muscle jump beneath the skin. His eyes went bright and wet, and for one terrible, beautiful moment, every wall he'd ever built was written on his face in ruins.

"Shizun. Did you love me?"

"Whatever I felt—it doesn't—It doesn't change what I did."

"*Did you love me?*"

Shizun's jaw clenched. "I pushed you into the Abyss. I watched you fall. Whatever I—it doesn't—"

"You can't even say no." Binghe's voice was barely a whisper. He stepped closer. His heart was pounding so hard he could hear it. "You can't say no because it's true."

"Binghe—"

"*Did you love me?*"

The question came out wild and pleading. A demand and a prayer all at once.

Shizun made a sound like something inside him was finally, irreparably breaking.

For a long moment, he didn't speak. Binghe watched something war behind those green eyes—fear and exhaustion and something else, something that looked like relief. The relief of a man finally setting down a weight he'd been carrying so long he'd forgotten what it felt like to stand straight.

When he spoke, his voice was barely a whisper. Fragile as spun glass.

"I painted you for years," he said, still not looking up. "What do you think?"

For a moment, Binghe couldn't breathe.

He loved me.

He loved me.

He LOVES me.

The realization didn't settle—it detonated. Blazed through him like wildfire, like lightning, like every sunrise he'd ever seen compressed into a single blinding moment. His knees nearly buckled. His eyes burned. His whole chest was cracking open, and what poured out was so bright it hurt to look at.

All those years of wanting. All those nights spent sick with longing, convinced he would never be enough. All those paintings he'd agonized over, torturing himself with the image of Shizun's hands devoted to someone else—

It was me. He was painting ME. Because he LOVED me.

"You loved me." The words came out like a revelation. Like the first light after a long, dark night. Then, softer, more fragile than he'd ever allowed himself to be: "You *love* me."

"Yes." The word was barely a breath. His eyes finally—*finally*—met Binghe's.

Yes.

One word. One breath. One impossible, world-ending, world-*remaking* syllable. And it had just rewritten everything Binghe thought he knew about his life.

He waited for Shizun to take it back. To qualify it, soften it, explain it away. The silence stretched. Shizun said nothing else.

Just *yes*.

He reached out—slowly, giving Shizun time to pull away.

He didn't pull away.

Binghe's hands came up to cup his face. Trembling. Like he was holding something holy.

Shizun's skin was warm under his palms. Soft. Real. Binghe could feel the fine bones beneath, the slight roughness of stubble along his jaw, the flutter of his pulse where Binghe's thumb brushed his throat. He'd dreamed of this—had woken aching from dreams exactly like this—but the reality was sharper. More overwhelming. In dreams, he couldn't feel the way Shizun's breath stuttered. Couldn't see the exact shade of green in those wide, wet eyes.

In dreams, Shizun always pulled away.

He wasn't pulling away.

"This whole time," he breathed. "You've loved me this whole time."

Shizun's eyes were bright. Wet. His voice came out ruined. "Binghe—"

"I thought you hated me." The words cracked in half. "I thought I was just a shadow of someone you actually loved. I thought I would spend the rest of my life trying to earn something you would never give. And you—you—"

"I never—" Shizun's voice faltered, dissolved into nothing. And then he was shaking his head—small, frantic movements, like he could physically reject what Binghe had believed. "There was never anyone else. There was only ever—"

He didn't finish. Didn't have to.

Binghe couldn't finish either. Pressed his forehead to Shizun's instead, breathing him in, feeling the warmth of him, the realness of him.

Alive. Here. Mine.

"I'm never letting you go," Binghe whispered against his skin. "Do you understand? You could try to run and I would follow. You could push me away a thousand times and I would come back a thousand and one. You have ruined me, Shizun. There is no version of my life that doesn't have you at the center of it."

Shizun's hand came up—hesitant, trembling—and settled against Binghe's chest. Not pushing away. Just... resting there. Like he needed proof Binghe was real.

Then a sound escaped Shizun's throat—the kind of fragile sound he would never have permitted himself to make if he'd had any control left. His fingers tightened in Binghe's robes, knuckles white, and when Binghe pulled back just enough to see his face, Shizun's face was stripped of every defense he'd ever built. Raw. Shaken. Exposed in a way that made Binghe want to wrap himself around him and never let anyone else see.

Good, Binghe thought fiercely. *Let me see you. Let me have this.*

Binghe's voice dropped to something low and fierce and absolute.

"You love me. And I am never letting you go."

The words came out like a vow. Like a threat. Like a promise written in blood and sealed with bone.

"Yes." Barely audible. An echo of his earlier confession—but this time it sounded like surrender.

Shizun's breath hitched. His lips parted as if to say something more—to protest, maybe, or to say something sensible about propriety and distance and all the reasons this was impossible—but no words came out. Just that same overwhelmed silence, those wet eyes holding Binghe's gaze like letting go would mean drowning.

So Binghe would make sure he never had to.

Let the cultivation world try to separate them. Let his father scheme. Let the heavens themselves descend to tear them apart. Binghe would fight them all. Would burn through every obstacle, destroy every enemy, remake the very fabric of reality if that's what it took.

Shizun loved him.

Nothing else mattered. Nothing else would ever matter again.

Tianlang-Jun stepped back. Quietly. Giving them space they probably didn't notice they needed.

A kiss in the Water Prison. The thought surfaced with something like rueful admiration. *And here I was playing the long game with scholarly debates. I thought the robes were a bold gesture.*

Tianlang-Jun watched them.

His son, looking at Shen Qingqiu like he'd stumbled into salvation after years of wandering in darkness. Shen Qingqiu, finally exposed, finally allowing himself to be seen, to be known, to be wanted without the shield of fear between them.

Ah, he thought.*That looks like love.*

He'd wanted that. He hadn't known how much until right now, watching it exist for someone else.

I could have loved him. Given time. Given the chance.

But the chance had never been real, had it? Shen Qingqiu's heart had been full before Tianlang-Jun ever met him. Full of a smiling, soft boy who would one day become an emperor.

There was no room for Tianlang-Jun in that alcove. There never had been.

He let himself feel it—the quiet grief of a door closing before he'd even decided whether to walk through it. The loss of something he'd only just realized he wanted.

I would have taken such good care of you, Tianlang-Jun thought. *I would have learned every version of you if you'd let me. I would have debated you about everything and nothing just to watch your eyes light up.*

If you had chosen me.

But Shen Qingqiu had made his choice years ago. Had painted it into existence, hidden it away, carried it through everything that came after.

The paintings were never of him. He understood that now.

They were of Luo Binghe. Had always been of Luo Binghe. Every tender stroke of the brush, every careful sculpted line—years of love made tangible, hidden away because Shen Qingqiu couldn't stop wanting someone he was certain he would lose. Someone he'd genuinely believed would kill him.

And Shen Qingqiu had loved Luo Binghe anyway.

I never stood a chance, Tianlang-Jun thought, and the realization was almost gentle.

He thought about Su Xiyan. Not the betrayer he'd constructed in his mind, but the real woman—the one who'd loved him enough to die rather than destroy their child.

A memory surfaced—or perhaps it had always been there, buried beneath centuries of bitter revision. Her laugh. She'd had a laugh so bright and clear. Had laughed when he deliberately bungled human customs just to see her smile.

"You're ridiculous," she'd told him once, still laughing, her hand pressed to her mouth. "An emperor of demons, and you can't even use chopsticks properly."

"I'm a fast learner," he'd said. "Teach me."

And she had. Patient and warm and so terribly, terribly human.

He'd forgotten that. Had let the madness rewrite her into something cold and calculating. But she'd been warm, and he'd loved her for it, and she'd died still loving him back.

The grief hit him like a wave he hadn't seen coming. Not sharp and searing—more like an old bruise being pressed. A vast, patient ache that had been waiting for him all this time, held back only by the dam of his delusions.

She loved me, he thought. *She chose me. And I never knew.*

Two loves. One lost to death and decades of madness. One lost to a truth that had existed before he'd ever entered the story.

It should have been bitter. Perhaps some part of it was.

But watching Luo Binghe press his forehead to Shen Qingqiu's, watching the demon emperor's hands tremble as they cradled his beloved's face, watching years of walls finally crumble—

Mostly it was just…true.

The grief of the real, or the ache of the almost.

He couldn't decide which hurt more. Perhaps it didn't matter. Perhaps loss was just loss, regardless of its shape.

"I was trying to compete with a love that has watched you across time, little emperor." His voice came out soft enough that he wasn't sure they heard him.

He let himself grieve for one more moment.

Be happy, he thought, looking at them. *Be happy with the one you chose.*

And Su Xiyan, wherever you are: I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't know. I'm sorry I hated you for loving me.

Then he set it all aside.

There was still work to do. Still a world that owed him a debt he intended to collect. Learning the truth about Su Xiyan had sharpened it into something with edges.

He moved.

Chapter End Notes

LBH: I made up a guy to be jealous of and the guy was ME?!
LBH: anyway I would burn the world down for you
SQQ: but I don't deserve—
LBH: I WOULD BURN. THE WORLD. DOWN.

This chapter fought me. I wanted to do justice to the moment Binghe finally—FINALLY—understands what those paintings meant. Years of jealousy and self-hatred and desperate wanting, and it was him. It was always him.

Also I'm emotionally compromised by Tianlang-Jun's quiet grief in the corner. He walked into this story thinking he'd found a lost love and walked out realizing he never had a chance—and also that he's been hating a dead woman for loving him. Someone hug him!

Next chapter: We're not done yet 👀

Chapter 21: Not Nearly Enough

Chapter Notes

Okay, I need to get a little sappy for a second.

The response to the last chapter genuinely overwhelmed me. This story started as pure crack — secret fan art! Ridiculous misunderstandings! Binghe inventing a guy to be jealous of! — and your comments are what made me want to go deeper. You validated all the work I put into making this payoff feel earned, and I can't tell you how much that means.

And then there's everyone who commented about being heartbroken over Tianlang-Jun. I had the alternate TLJ ending outlined and had planned to take a break first. But your response gave me the motivation to start writing it immediately.

And then I outlined a whole sequel story to the alternate TLJ ending because I couldn't let LBH stay sad.

All that to say that your comments are literally fuel for this story. Thank you for reading. Thank you for feeling things 💚

Quick note before we jump in: I've added a new interlude chapter. It's SQQ's POV of the mirror scene from Through the Scrying Glass. I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe's hand was on his face.

Trembling and cradling his jaw like Shen Qingqiu might disappear if he let go.

His walls were in ruins. Everything he'd spent years hiding — the artwork, the truth about the Abyss, the raw and shameful math of *I let you fall to save myself* — all of it was out now, scattered across the floor between them like shattered glass.

Shen Qingqiu had braced for this moment for so long. Had imagined it in the dark, in the silence, in all the spaces where fear lived. Binghe's face changing. The look of admiration curdling into something else as understanding set in. The slow, terrible withdrawal of someone realizing the person they'd rebuilt themselves around wasn't worth it.

He had expected disgust. Confusion. The cold reassessment of a man recalculating whether his devotion had been wasted on someone who didn't deserve it.

Shen Qingqiu had not expected *this*.

This being: Luo Binghe’s hands framing his face, too carefully, as if any pressure might shatter him. Luo Binghe's eyes — red-rimmed, wrecked, incandescent — searching his face like he was trying to memorize every pore. Luo Binghe looking at him the way no one had ever looked at him in either of his lives, like Shen Qingqiu was something so precious it hurt to hold.

This is it. The thought came distant, dizzy. *This is where everything changes.*

He'd told Binghe everything. The ugly math of it. The selfish, survivalist core of the decision he'd buried under years of guilt and justification.

And Binghe hadn't flinched. Hadn't pulled away, hadn't gone cold, hadn't looked at him the way Shen Qingqiu had spent years imagining he would — with the dawning realization that his beloved Shizun was just a frightened man who'd let him fall to save his own skin.

Instead, he'd said *I would fall into a thousand Abysses if it meant you lived*, and the words had landed like a detonation in Shen Qingqiu's chest, rearranging everything.

He'd reached for Binghe —in the mirror, in the dark, across the distance of everything that separated them — terrified he might find nothing on the other side.

Oh, Shen Qingqiu thought, very quietly. *So this is what it feels like when the frighteningly impossible thing doesn't destroy you.*

Up close, Binghe was—

Different. Different from the boy he'd raised, different from the idea he'd loved on a screen, different from every careful brushstroke he'd rendered by candlelight. The jaw was sharper than his paintings had predicted. His crimson eyes were burning brighter than any pigment Shen Qingqiu had ever mixed, shot through with flecks of gold that caught the light when his head tilted.

The demon mark blazed on his forehead — the same mark that had stared back at Shen Qingqiu from a hundred of his own paintings, the one he'd rendered so many times he could trace it from memory, except on paper it had never *pulsed* like this, never thrown faint light across the planes of a face tight with emotion.

This was the man he had first met at the water prison. The man forged by the Abyss. The one Shen Qingqiu had *chosen* — not drifted toward, not defaulted to, but chosen — across a dying array with nothing but a name and a plea.

And he was here. Real. Not the safe choice — not the legible one, the one Shen Qingqiu could have traced the outline of. But *this* one. The one that made no rational sense. The one he'd wanted anyway.

Shen Qingqiu's hands were fisted in the front of Binghe's robes — when had he grabbed on? He couldn't remember reaching, but his knuckles were white and his fingers wouldn't unclench, like his body had decided independently that letting go was not an option it was willing to consider.

Luo Binghe was shaking under his grip like a fault line held together by sheer will.

He had thought the paintings were of his father. Had spent years believing Shen Qingqiu's heart belonged to someone else.

And Shen Qingqiu had been so certain — so *certain* — that the Abyss would destroy the boy who smiled at him. That what came back would never forgive.

They had both been so spectacularly, devastatingly wrong.

Luo Binghe's thumb traced across his cheekbone, feather-light. The touch was almost unbearably gentle — the careful precision of someone who had taught himself tenderness like a second language and was still afraid of getting the grammar wrong.

"Shizun," he breathed. "I—"

His voice cracked. Whatever he'd been about to say dissolved into something wordless and raw, and his thumb stilled on Shen Qingqiu's cheek, and his eyes were so full of things he couldn't say that Shen Qingqiu's chest physically ached with the weight of being looked at like that.

I know, Shen Qingqiu thought. *I know. Me too. I don't have the words for it either.*

For one perfect, terrible heartbeat, Shen Qingqiu let himself believe it might be okay.

Then Tianlang-Jun moved.

One moment he was standing at the edge of the room—Shen Qingqiu had almost forgotten he was there.

The next—

Power detonated outward from where Tianlang-Jun stood. Ancient, suffocating, *wrong*. Shen Qingqiu's spiritual senses screamed as a seal array blazed to life beneath Binghe's feet, complex beyond anything he'd ever seen.

Binghe's hand fell away from his face.

No—

"Binghe!" Shen Qingqiu lunged for him, but Tianlang-Jun's hand closed around his wrist, holding him back with effortless strength. Luo Binghe was already crumpling from the weight of the seal slamming down on his cultivation. Xin Mo slipped from his fingers, clattering against the stone floor.

Seal marks crawled across Luo Binghe's skin like glowing chains, locking down his spiritual energy, his demonic power, everything that made him *dangerous*. He hit the ground hard, gasping—the sheer force of the suppression driving him flat.

"I'm sorry," Tianlang-Jun said. He sounded genuinely apologetic.

He bent down to retrieve Xin Mo with his other hand. The sword shrieked when he picked it up. Black energy lashed out like a wounded beast, violent and hungry. Shen Qingqiu had seen what that sword did to people who tried to wield it. Had read about it in excruciating detail across five million words of stallion novel.

Tianlang-Jun's hand blazed with light. The sword settled.

He just... picked it up. Like it was a mildly irritated cat.

AIRPLANE. WHAT DID YOU WRITE.

"The seal will hold him for perhaps a day," Tianlang-Jun said, turning back to face them. Xin Mo rested in his grip like it belonged there. "Long enough for what needs to be done."

Shen Qingqiu's mind was racing, crashing, screaming in every direction at once.

The array theory discussions. The questions about dimensional weak points. The debates about optimal anchor placement that Shen Qingqiu had won, had been so smugly satisfied about winning—

"You used me," Shen Qingqiu said flatly.

"I prefer to think of it as... collaborative research." Tianlang-Jun's smile was almost fond. "Your insights on energy flow optimization alone saved me months of calculations. The realm merger will be far more elegant thanks to your critiques."

Oh good. My scathing commentary on his array calculations is going to help him destroy reality more elegantly. Wonderful. Fantastic. I'm so glad my expertise could contribute to the apocalypse.

"This was your plan all along."

"Partially." Tianlang-Jun examined the sword with an appraising eye, turning it to catch the light. "I did genuinely believe we might have had a romance, at first. The evidence was quite compelling." He tilted his head, an apology threading through his tone. "But yes. I needed Xin Mo. I needed Luo Binghe to bring it to me. And I needed—" He paused. "Well. 'Bait' seems unkind. Let's say I needed a compelling reason for him to arrive emotionally compromised and not thinking clearly."

"You bastard," Luo Binghe gasped from the floor. He was already pushing himself up, slower than he should be—momentarily stunned by the force of the seal slamming down. His cultivation was locked, his demonic power suppressed, his body left to work without either for the first time in years.

"I prefer 'opportunist,'" Tianlang-Jun said mildly. He turned back to Shen Qingqiu, and his expression softened, turned tender. "It truly was lovely, you know. Our conversations. Your vicious little critiques." His voice had gone soft. Wistful. "The way you'd get that little furrow between your brows when you found a flaw in my reasoning."

"But not enough to give up your revenge," Shen Qingqiu said.

Tianlang-Jun's smile went feral. "No. Not nearly enough for that."

He stepped closer.

Shen Qingqiu's wrist was still caught in that grip—iron, but surprisingly gentle. He couldn't pull away, couldn't go to Binghe, couldn't do anything but stand there as Tianlang-Jun closed the distance between them. On the floor, Luo Binghe was struggling to rise, eyes tracking every movement with murderous intensity.

"I want you to know," Tianlang-Jun said, voice dropping low, intimate, "that if circumstances were different—if I weren't who I am, if I didn't need what I need—I would have very much liked to see where this could have gone."

His eyes traced over Shen Qingqiu's face with open appreciation.

"You are," he said softly, "the most fascinating person I've met in centuries. That mind—sharp enough to cut, quick enough to keep up with me, passionate enough to throw books at walls over array theory." A smile, warm and ruinous. "And your beauty—well, it goes without saying your beauty rivals your intellect. Wars have been started over less. It's almost unfair."

Is he... is he COMPLIMENTING me while betraying me?

Why is that WORKING?

A thin, unwelcome warmth brushed his traitorous chest, leaving an ache in its wake. His traitorous skin was flushing. His traitorous *knees* were going weak in response to the tenderness in Tianlang-Jun's voice, the admiration in his eyes, the sheer *presence* of him—

STOP IT, he screamed internally. *He is LITERALLY ABOUT TO DESTROY THE WORLD. This is NOT the time to be having a physiological response!*

"In another life," Tianlang-Jun continued, voice faraway, "I would have moved mountains to earn even one of your smiles."

His grip shifted, turned Shen Qingqiu's wrist gently until his palm faced upward. Tianlang-Jun lowered his head and pressed a kiss to the center of it—lingering, deliberate, his crimson eyes never leaving Shen Qingqiu's face.

The touch lingered.

Luo Binghe tried to rise—and his legs gave out beneath him. He caught himself hard on his palms, shaking like a newborn animal.

"*Get your hands off him.*"

Tianlang-Jun didn't so much as glance his way. His lips moved against Shen Qingqiu's palm, gentle and unhurried.

Binghe snarled and tried again—got one knee under him, then the other, swaying. Every inch of progress cost him. "*I will kill you.*"

"Until we meet again," Tianlang-Jun murmured against his skin, as though Binghe hadn't spoken at all.

Shen Qingqiu felt distant from his own body. There was too much happening—Tianlang-Jun's mouth on his skin, Luo Binghe's voice cracking with rage, the impossible weight of being fought over by people who shouldn't want him this much.

Then Tianlang-Jun straightened. His fingers uncurled from Shen Qingqiu's wrist slowly—one by one, as though the rest of him hadn't quite agreed to let go yet. He let the hand fall, and stepped back.

One pace. Two. Three.

The distance opened between them, and Tianlang-Jun held Shen Qingqiu's gaze the entire way—warm, regretful, utterly without apology. Then he turned away.

Xin Mo sang as he raised it. That hungry, resonant hum that made reality flinch. The rift tore open with a sound like silk shredding, dark and swirling, pulling at the edges of the room.

Tianlang-Jun paused at the threshold.

Didn't turn fully—just looked back over his shoulder, and for a moment, framed against the hungry dark of the portal, he looked like something out of a painting himself. The demon emperor in his element. Terrible and beautiful and utterly beyond reach.

His gaze moved from Shen Qingqiu to Binghe—still struggling to rise, jaw tight, eyes tracking every movement—and something flickered across Tianlang-Jun's face. Brief. Raw. Gone before it could be named.

"I genuinely cannot decide," he said softly, "if I'm more jealous of him for having you, or of you for having someone who looks at you the way he does."

The words made Shen Qingqiu's breath catch—a sharp inhale that forgot to become an exhale.

Tianlang-Jun smiled—sad and knowing and terribly, terribly kind—and stepped through the portal.

Reality snapped shut behind him like a closing jaw.

Silence.

Shen Qingqiu stood frozen, palm still open, arm half-raised — the pose of someone reaching for something that was no longer there. He lowered it slowly, fingers curling closed. His skin was still tingling where Tianlang-Jun's lips had been.

...If I'm more jealous of him for having you.

Or of you for having someone who looks at you the way he does.

Both. He'd wanted both. To be loved like that, and to have someone to love like that.

Why does that make me want to cry?

How much had today cost him? Learning that Su Xiyan had never betrayed him—that she'd died still loving him, and he'd spent decades hating her for nothing. And then standing here, watching Shen Qingqiu reach past him for someone else.

Tianlang-Jun had kidnapped him. Had used him. Was about to destroy the world. He was the villain. Shen Qingqiu should be feeling righteous fury, not this strange hollow ache in his chest.

But Tianlang-Jun had also *seen* him. Had made being difficult feel like a gift instead of a character flaw. Had delighted in every argument, every correction, every time Shen Qingqiu forgot to be polite and said something that would have gotten him banned from three different internet forums.

Had liked him — not the peak lord mask, not the graceful immortal act, but the part that got vicious about bad scholarship and forgot to eat when he was thinking.

The difficult part. The real part that—

Stop it. Stop it right now.

He's evil. He's EVIL. You cannot be feeling sorry for the evil demon emperor who just betrayed you.

And yet.

And yet some part of Shen Qingqiu was thinking about a different version of this story. In another life, where Luo Binghe never came and where the week stretched into a month, a year. Where the intellectual sparring turned into something else, where the flirtation stopped being one-sided, where Shen Qingqiu let himself be charmed by a man who found his mind extraordinary and his face worth starting wars over.

Would that have been so bad?

Yes! he told himself firmly. *Yes, it would have been bad! World destruction. Realm merger. Apocalypse. Very bad!*

"Shizun."

Binghe's voice — strained, pained — cut through the fog like a blade.

Shen Qingqiu's hand dropped to his side. The world rushed back in like a bucket of cold water.

Right. Luo Binghe's powers are sealed. Evil demon emperor is escaping with the world-ending sword to start an apocalypse.

Process feelings later. Survive now.

Shen Qingqiu dropped to his knees beside Luo Binghe. The seal marks were glowing, but he wasn't struggling anymore—just breathing hard, eyes fixed on the space where Tianlang-Jun's portal had been.

And the look on his face—not just fury. Not just hurt.

Betrayal.

Oh, Binghe. No. That's not—I didn't—

"Binghe." His voice came out cracked. His hands were moving before he could think—cupping Binghe's face, tilting it toward him, thumbs brushing across cheekbones the way Binghe had done to him so many times. "Binghe, please look at me."

Those wet eyes finally focused on him. Still wounded. Still accusing.

"I didn't—" Shen Qingqiu swallowed. "I chose *you*. I reached for *you*. Whatever that was, it wasn't—"

He didn't know how to finish. Didn't know how to explain that his body had frozen, that he'd been drowning in too many feelings to move, that Tianlang-Jun's farewell had meant something but not *that*, not what Binghe's face was saying he thought it meant.

"You called for me." Binghe's voice was hoarse. "In the mirror. You said *please*."

"Yes."

"And then he—" Binghe's jaw tightened. "And you *let* him—"

"*Binghe.*" Shen Qingqiu pressed their foreheads together. Desperate. "I'm here. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. I chose you. I *choose* you. Whatever happens next, that doesn't change."

A shudder ran through Luo Binghe's body. His hands came up — unsteady, almost hesitant — and fisted in Shen Qingqiu’s robes as though letting go would break something fragile.

"Promise," he whispered. It came out broken. Young.

"I promise."

Luo Binghe's grip on his robes tightened. His jaw was set, his brows drawn together in a way that was clearly meant to be dignified fury but landed somewhere closer to... sulking.

He had no right to look like that. He was a grown man. A demon lord. He had just torn through seventeen dimensional barriers with nothing but rage and a cursed sword. He should

not be able to look like a rained-on cat who'd been denied a treat.

And yet.

Cute, some traitorous part of Shen Qingqiu's brain supplied. *That's too cute!*

Shen Qingqiu was going to die. Not from Without a Cure, not from the apocalypse Tianlang-Jun was about to start—but from discovering that the most powerful man in three realms could pout at him and reduce his internal dignity to dust.

Focus. Apocalypse. Sword. World ending. Stop looking at his face.

Then — voices. Footsteps. Someone was coming.

Mobei-Jun's portal opened at the edge of Tianlang-Jun's legendary defenses.

He stepped through first—always first, always between Shang Qinghua and danger—and assessed the situation with the cold efficiency of a general surveying a battlefield.

What had once been the outermost barrier was now a wound in reality. The spatial layer hung in tatters, edges still smoking with Xin Mo's hungry signature.

"Oh no." Shang Qinghua stumbled through behind him, catching himself on Mobei-Jun's arm before snatching his hand back. "The spatial layers are destabilized. If we take a wrong turn, we could end up scattered across seventeen different sub-dimensions."

"Then don't take wrong turns."

"Yes, my king."

And then, under his breath: "*Very helpful. Tactical genius at work.*"

Mobei-Jun's hearing was excellent. He heard every word Shang Qinghua muttered when he thought no one was listening. Every complaint. Every exasperated "*why is he like this*" and "*my king, seriously*."

He heard them all. He never mentioned it.

He found it pleasing, being the audience for Qinghua's private commentary. It meant the fear was performance—a mask worn for safety—not genuine terror that ran all the way down.

Shang Qinghua pulled out his compass, fingers flying across its face. "Follow the destruction. Binghe carved a path—I can track the decay pattern, ride the wake of his passage." He looked up, a sharp focus in his expression. "Stay close, my king."

They moved through the shattered barriers quickly, Shang Qinghua counting under his breath. "Seven. Eight. Nine—step exactly where I step, the floor isn't real on the left—"

Mobei-Jun stepped where Shang Qinghua stepped. Even when the next footfall looked like void. Even when every instinct told him there was nothing there.

There was no one else he would have trusted to lead him through nothingness.

The final barrier gave way to reveal what remained of the estate.

They followed the destruction through ruined corridors until—

"Cucumber-bro! We saw—the scrying array—we came as fast as—"

He stopped. Took in the scene. His face went pale.

Luo Binghe on his knees with seal marks glowing across his skin. He was radiating killing intent even now, while weakened and without his powers.

Shen Qingqiu kneeling beside him. Face pale, composure shattered, one hand pressed to Luo Binghe's chest like he could hold him together through sheer will.

No sign of Tianlang-Jun. No sign of Xin Mo.

Mobei-Jun's eyes cut to Shang Qinghua. Watched realization dawn.

"He took Xin Mo, didn't he."

"Yes." Luo Binghe's voice was strained. "He took Xin Mo. That was his plan all along."

Shang Qinghua's expression shifted—fear giving way to determination. More focused. His hands steadied as his mind engaged fully with the problem.

There.

This was the version of Shang Qinghua that Mobei-Jun had claimed as his own. The one who saw disasters as puzzles. The one who found angles when everyone else saw only walls.

Mobei-Jun had tried everything he knew to make Shang Qinghua understand what that claiming meant. Had demonstrated his power, his worthiness, his ability to provide. Had given him position and protection and access to all that Mobei-Jun controlled—honors other demons would kill for. Had touched him often enough that the spy carried Mobei-Jun's scent everywhere he went. Ozone and winter. The mark of the Northern territories. *Mine.*

And still Shang Qinghua flinched. Still he performed. Still he called Mobei-Jun "my king" like armor instead of acknowledgment.

What more was required?

Shang Qinghua was pulling out communication talismans now, scribbling notes, and without thinking he stuck his brush between his teeth while fumbling for another scroll.

The brush caught between those lips. Cheeks hollowing as he adjusted his grip.

Mobei-Jun looked away.

Focus.

He was Luo Binghe's general. His executioner. The Northern Lord who had earned his place through blood and ice and violence that made other demons speak his name in whispers. He had stood beside the demon emperor on battlefields that shattered mountains.

He should not be distracted by the way his Qinghua's mouth looked wrapped around a writing instrument.

"The realm merger," Shang Qinghua said around the brush. "Where's he going?"

"The Borderlands." Shen Qingqiu's voice was hollow. "Where the ley lines cross near Huangquan Pass—the barrier between realms is thinnest there. I gave him the exact coordinates. Three hours, maybe four."

"And the seal will hold for a full day." Shang Qinghua pulled the brush from his mouth. "We don't have a day."

Mobei-Jun looked at Luo Binghe. Then at Shen Qingqiu. Then back at Shang Qinghua.

He raised one eyebrow. Trusted he'd be understood without words.

Shang Qinghua's expression shifted. "Oh." His eyes darted between the two men on the floor. "*Oh.*"

He turned back to Shen Qingqiu.

"Cucumber-bro. You *know* what the solution is."

Shen Qingqiu looked like a man who already knew the answer and hated it.

"There isn't another way, bro." Shang Qinghua's voice was blunt. Practical. "Dual cultivation with a heavenly demon. It'll break the seal and cure your Without a Cure."

"No," Shen Qingqiu's voice went sharp. "We just — this is too *fast*. I won't use him like some — some convenient cultivation resource. He's not a *tool*."

Mobei-Jun watched something flicker across Luo Binghe's face. Surprise. Then a raw, unguarded awe — like Shen Qingqiu had given him a gift he hadn't known he wanted.

"Shizun." Luo Binghe's voice dropped low. Rough. "*Look at me.*"

Shen Qingqiu looked.

Even from across the room, Mobei-Jun could see the heat in Luo Binghe's eyes. The hunger. The way his gaze dragged over Shen Qingqiu's face like a physical touch.

“You would not be using me," Luo Binghe said, voice scraping low, "I have wanted this for *years*."

His hand came up — still trembling, still weak — and found the back of Shen Qingqiu's neck. Drew him down. Close enough that their foreheads almost touched.

"*Please*, Shizun."

And Shen Qingqiu's defiant expression crumbled. What replaced it wasn't resignation.

It was *want*.

So that's what it looks like, Mobei-Jun thought. *When pretense falls away.*

He wondered if Shang Qinghua would ever look at him like that.

Sometimes "my king" came out different. Softer. Almost warm. Mobei-Jun lived for those moments—even if he didn't know what they meant.

"Two hours," Shang Qinghua said, tucking away his talismans. “I'll coordinate evacuation. Mobei-Jun will come back for you. Don't—" He glanced at Luo Binghe's hand on Shen Qingqiu's neck, at the way neither of them seemed to remember anyone else was in the room. "—yeah, you'll be fine. Let's *go*, my king."

Mobei-Jun followed Shang Qinghua out into the corridor.

The estate groaned around them, spatial fabric unstable from Binghe's passage. They would need to navigate back through the torn barriers carefully—one wrong step and the collapsing dimensions could scatter them across reality.

Shang Qinghua already had his compass out, recalibrating for the return journey. His hands were shaking.

The real tremor this time—not theatrical, not performed. The fine vibration that only appeared when genuine terror gripped him.

Mobei-Jun stopped walking.

In the bright halls of his palace, when no threats loomed, he threw Shang Qinghua into walls. Barked orders. Made demands that sent his spy scurrying. Proper demon courtship—displays of strength, demonstrations that he was worthy of being served, that Shang Qinghua had chosen to follow someone powerful.

But here, now, with real danger pressing in and his little spy genuinely afraid—

Here, Mobei-Jun became something else entirely.

He reached out and caught his Qinghua's wrist. Gently. More gently than he touched anything else in his brutal life.

Mobei-Jun’s fingers were cold — they were always cold — and Shang Qinghua's skin was fever-warm beneath them. The tremor stilled where frost met heat.

His Qinghua looked up at him, eyes wide. Confused. A little wary, even—like he wasn't sure what Mobei-Jun wanted from him, or what this softness was supposed to mean.

They're the same, Mobei-Jun thought, frustration flickering beneath his frozen surface. The beatings and this. It was always the same. The beatings were to show you my strength—that you serve someone worthy. This is to show you my care—that I will protect what is mine.

Why is this not enough?

The answer was always the same: he didn't know. Had never known. The certainty that came so naturally in battle dissolved into uselessness here.

The dim light caught his Qinghua's face—the soft curve of his cheek, the parted lips, the frantic intelligence in those eyes. Always moving, always calculating, always *alive* in a way Mobei-Jun found endlessly fascinating.

Mine, he thought, with the absolute certainty of a demon lord who had never questioned his own possessiveness. *This one is mine. He has been mine since he chose to serve me. Since he looked at me bleeding and decided to help instead of run.*

He just needed Shang Qinghua to realize it.

Mobei-Jun released him.

When you're ready, he thought. *I'll be here.*

He had thought it so many times it had become a meditation. A mantra. The shape his devotion took when he couldn't speak it aloud.

But watching Luo Binghe finally claim what was his—watching that desperate, violent love finally be *seen* and *answered*—

Mobei-Jun's hands closed at his sides. Not fists — he was not angry. Just... holding on to nothing, the way he always did when the wanting became difficult to carry.

For "my king" to sound like those rare, soft moments — always, not just sometimes.

For the waiting to finally end.

Mobei-Jun had been patient for years. He could be patient longer.

But he was so *tired* of patience.

Behind them, Luo Binghe had two hours. Two hours to finally have what he'd torn through seventeen barriers to reach.

Mobei-Jun wondered how many more years he would need to wait for Shang Qinghua, wondered when his efforts would finally be enough.

He opened a portal to the edge of the barrier space. Shang Qinghua stepped through, already raising his compass.

His Qinghua stood silhouetted against the unstable shimmer of the torn barriers, compass in hand. Already working. Already planning.

He was so devastatingly beautiful like this. Shang Qinghua was always beautiful, but Mobei-Jun noticed it most in moments like these—when his little Peak Lord forgot to be afraid, forgot to perform, and simply *was*.

"Stay close, my king."

He followed.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter count increased again. I know. I KNOW. At this point, the chapter count is its own character with its own arc and I've lost all control over it.

Me: Okay the betrayal, a quick appearance by MBJ and SQH to set up the last part of the story and then it’s finally DONE
MBJ: catches Qinghua's wrist
Me: …fine. You can have your moment.
MBJ: says nothing, communicates entire novel's worth of devotion through a single thumb on a pulse point
Me: I said FINE.

Chapter 22: Two Hours

Luo Binghe's hand was on the back of his neck.

Shen Qingqiu wasn't sure when it had happened—when the trembling fingers that had drawn him down had resettled there, finding the gap between his collar and his hairline, that strip of bare skin that no amount of high-necked robes could fully protect. They were resting there now. Not gripping. Not pulling. Just resting, with a gentleness that raised goosebumps all the way down Shen Qingqiu's spine.

The room was quiet.

Too quiet. When had it gotten this quiet?

Shen Qingqiu's awareness expanded outward in a slow, dawning horror—past Binghe's breath on his lips, past the hand on his neck, past the hammering of his own pulse—and found emptiness. No rustle of Shang Qinghua's robes. No chill of Mobei-Jun's presence. No portal hum, no retreating footsteps, nothing.

They were gone.

He and Luo Binghe were alone.

Two hours, Shang Qinghua had said.

Two hours. And now there was nothing in this room but Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe, and the weight of what they were about to do.

He should be thinking about logistics. Dual cultivation mechanics, spiritual energy circulation, the practical steps necessary to break the seal and cure Without a Cure before Tianlang-Jun's revenge killed countless people.

He was thinking about Luo Binghe's mouth.

Specifically: how close it was. How it was parted slightly, lips bitten raw. How Binghe's breath kept hitching every time Shen Qingqiu shifted even fractionally closer, as if proximity itself was something that hurt.

He was cataloguing. Analyzing. Breaking down the most charged moment of his life into observable data points, because that was what Shen Qingqiu *did*—three-thousand-word forum posts dissecting PIDW's cultivation mechanics, meticulous brushstroke studies of a face he'd been painting for years, and now this. Counting the intervals between Luo Binghe's breaths instead of just *breathing*.

The protagonist who had looked at him across a ruined room and said, with devastating simplicity, *You saw me.*

The protagonist whose thumb was now tracing slow, absent circles against the nape of Shen Qingqiu's neck—a motion that seemed entirely unconscious, which somehow made it worse.

"Shizun." Binghe's voice scraped low, rough at the edges. His fingers tightened fractionally on Shen Qingqiu's neck—not pulling, but holding. Like he was afraid that if he let go, the last minute would prove to be another dream he'd have to wake from. "You're shaking."

Was he?

He was. His hands, traitors that they were, had developed a fine tremor. His whole body had, actually—a vibration running beneath his skin like a plucked string.

"I'm assessing," he managed.

"You're deflecting." No heat in it. Almost fond. Binghe's eyes tracked across his face with an intensity that bordered on worship—cataloguing every detail as though he planned to paint this moment from memory later.

Which was something Shen Qingqiu understood intimately, actually. The urge to commit someone to permanence. To trace the shape of them until your hands could render them in the dark.

He let himself look. Really look—past the burning eyes and parted lips to the rest of him.

And immediately regretted it.

Binghe's outer robes were still technically *on*, in the loosest possible sense of the word. The journey through the spatial barriers surrounding the pocket dimension had reduced them to something closer to a suggestion—silk shredded across the shoulders, hanging open where ties had snapped, gaping in long diagonal tears that revealed the inner robe beneath. Which was in no better shape. The fabric clung to his chest in damp, torn strips, and through the gaps Shen Qingqiu could see skin. A *lot* of skin. The gold-and-crimson whorls of the seal marks tracing along his collarbones, curling down over his ribs, disappearing beneath fabric that was barely doing its job.

The heat radiating off him was tangible even through their remaining layers. His chest rose and fell with an evenness that was too controlled to be natural—a man holding himself in check through sheer force of will. And the seal marks glowing against skin that Shen Qingqiu's paintings had only ever approximated, that was simply and devastatingly *real*—

"The seal," Shen Qingqiu said, because if he didn't say something practical he was going to do something deeply impractical. "The dual cultivation. There are steps—energy circulation patterns, spiritual channels that need to align—"

"Shizun." Binghe's other hand came up. Found his jaw. Tilted his face down so their eyes met fully, and the contact sent a jolt through Shen Qingqiu's meridians that had nothing to do with spiritual energy. "I know you're scared."

"I'm not—"

"You're terrified." Still soft. Still so unbearably gentle that it made Shen Qingqiu's chest ache. "So am I."

The man who had torn through seventeen spatial barriers without hesitation. Who had faced down his own father with murder in his eyes. Who had clawed his way out of the Endless Abyss on nothing but spite and devotion and the raw, stubborn refusal to die without seeing Shen Qingqiu's face again—that man was looking at him now with his hand shaking on Shen Qingqiu's jaw, and admitting that *this* was the part that frightened him.

"I've never done this," Binghe said quietly.

Shen Qingqiu knew this, intellectually. Shang Qinghua had told him—voice pitched high with disbelief—that Luo Binghe had apparently refused every woman in the demon realm. That he'd conquered territories and consolidated power at breakneck speed while remaining stubbornly, inexplicably untouched.

But hearing Binghe say it directly, watching his face as he admitted it, close enough that Shen Qingqiu could count his eyelashes—

"All those years," Shen Qingqiu heard himself say. "You never—not once—"

"Never." No hesitation. No embarrassment. Just simple, absolute fact. "There was no one else I wanted. There will never be anyone else."

The words cracked something open in Shen Qingqiu's ribcage.

What the fuck, he thought eloquently. *What the actual fuck, Airplane, you wrote him like this, you wrote a protagonist who could have anyone in any realm and he just—DIDN'T—because he was waiting for—*

"So we'll learn together." Binghe's voice was still soft, but there was something underneath it now. Something that made Shen Qingqiu's breath catch. "If Shizun would help me to the bed."

The bed.

Right.

The bed was a thing that existed in this room.

Shen Qingqiu had been aware of it peripherally—the way you're aware of a cliff edge while standing on solid ground. It sat against the far wall, absurdly large, draped in silk the color of midnight. The kind of bed that featured prominently in the more explicit chapters of PIDW. The kind of bed that Shen Qingqiu had definitely not thought about while reading those chapters.

"For the cultivation," he said. His voice came out remarkably steady for a man whose internal monologue was currently just a sustained, high-pitched tone. "Right. Yes. For the dual cultivation. Which is what we're doing. Cultivating. Dually."

Smooth, he told himself. *Very smooth. Truly the epitome of the composed immortal master. Definitely not about to dissolve into a puddle on this very expensive floor.*

Something flickered across Binghe's face. Not quite amusement—he looked too undone for amusement—but something adjacent to it. Something warm and wondering, like he couldn't quite believe Shen Qingqiu was still *this* even now.

"Dually," Binghe repeated.

"Don't repeat it back to me, it sounds worse when you repeat it—"

"Shizun." His thumb traced along the hinge of Shen Qingqiu's jaw. "Take me to bed."

Shen Qingqiu's brain shorted out.

He slid an arm around Binghe's waist before the higher functions could reboot and object. Binghe was heavier than he expected—solid muscle and bone, the kind of weight that reminded you a body was *real*—and the motion pulled them flush together. Through the ruined layers of Binghe's robes, Shen Qingqiu could feel the heat of him like a furnace. The torn silk might as well not have been there at all.

Binghe went rigid.

His face dropped to Shen Qingqiu's neck immediately—not nuzzling, not gentle, just pressing there. Inhaling in deep, ragged pulls against Shen Qingqiu's pulse point.

"Those robes." The words came out guttural. Almost pained. "Through the scrying mirror—even those few minutes—seeing him put his colors on you—knowing you'd been dressed in them for a week—"

His arm tightened around Shen Qingqiu. Not leaning. *Claiming.*

"And now I can smell him." A sound tore from Binghe's throat—not quite a growl, not quite a groan. Something more animal than either. "Sandalwood. His scent. In your hair. On your skin. A week of him touching what's *mine*—"

He broke off. His teeth grazed Shen Qingqiu's throat.

Shen Qingqiu's knees buckled.

Oh, he thought distantly. *Oh, this is—this is very—*

In PIDW, the possessive scenes had always read as slightly ridiculous. Protagonists growling about scent-marking, getting territorial over borrowed robes—overwrought alpha-male nonsense that Shen Qingqiu had mocked extensively in forum discussions.

He was not mocking it now.

He was not capable of mocking anything right now, because Binghe's mouth was on his throat and his voice was doing things that no amount of rational thought could withstand.

"I need them *off* you." The words vibrated against Shen Qingqiu's pulse. "I need every trace of him gone. I need—"

His hands were already moving. Finding the collar of the outer robe—Tianlang-Jun's outer robe—and yanking.

The fabric tore.

Shen Qingqiu's breath caught as the outer layer was wrenched off his shoulders. Ties snapped. Seams gave way. Ruined silk scattered across the floor, and Binghe didn't even glance at it—just shoved the remnants away like they had personally offended him and inhaled against Shen Qingqiu's newly bared skin.

"Better." Low. Rough. "But not enough. I can still smell—"

He pulled back, eyes crimson at the edges, the demon mark flickering on his forehead despite the seal's suppression.

"The bed," he said, voice raw. "Now. Before I tear the rest off of you right here."

Shen Qingqiu's face was on fire.

They made it to the bed in a graceless tangle—Shen Qingqiu half-carrying Binghe's weight, Binghe's hand fisted in the back of Shen Qingqiu's remaining robes like a lifeline, both of them stumbling the last few steps. Binghe sat on the edge of the mattress, and when Shen Qingqiu tried to step back, his hand shot out and caught Shen Qingqiu's wrist.

"Stay."

"I'm not going anywhere, I just—"

"Stay." The word cracked in the middle. "Shizun. Please. I need—"

He stopped. His grip on Shen Qingqiu's wrist was unsteady.

And Shen Qingqiu realized, with a start, that Luo Binghe was afraid.

Not of the seal. Not of the apocalypse they still needed to prevent. But of this—this moment. This room. The possibility that Shen Qingqiu might still somehow slip away.

"I tore through seventeen barriers." Binghe's voice was quiet now. Raw. "I would have torn through a thousand more. I would have unmade reality itself if that's what it took to reach you."

His thumb traced over Shen Qingqiu's pulse point, and the touch was so gentle it hurt.

"Every dimension. Every law of reality that stood between us—I would have broken them all and kept breaking them until there was nothing left but you and me." He looked up, and his eyes were wet. "I need to know this is real. I need to know I'm not going to wake up in the Abyss again, reaching for something that isn't there."

Shen Qingqiu's hand found the back of Binghe's neck before he'd consciously decided to move. His fingers slid into the tangled hair at his nape—the same gesture Binghe had been holding him with since this began, mirrored now, returned.

He thought about what Binghe must have endured. Three years in the Abyss, believing his Shizun had pushed him to his death. Believing the paintings in that alcove were proof that Shen Qingqiu's heart belonged to someone else. Coming back anyway. Fighting anyway. *Wanting* anyway, despite everything.

And now he was sitting here, seal-weakened and shaking, looking at Shen Qingqiu like he was something precious and fragile and easily lost.

"You're not dreaming," Shen Qingqiu said. His voice came out strange—too soft, too open. "I'm here. This is real."

"Prove it."

The challenge was barely a whisper.

Shen Qingqiu sat down on the bed beside him.

The mattress dipped, shifting them closer. This near, he could see everything—the rapid flutter of Binghe's pulse in his throat, the parted lips, the aching hope he was failing to hide.

They were breathing the same air.

The realization struck Shen Qingqiu with absurd force—they were so close now that every inhale brought Binghe's scent, every exhale meant breathing air that had just passed Binghe's lips. It felt obscenely intimate. They hadn't even properly kissed yet and already Shen Qingqiu felt like he was drowning.

"Shizun—"

Shen Qingqiu kissed him.

It wasn't a good kiss.

Shen Qingqiu aimed wrong, catching the corner of Binghe's mouth instead of center. Their noses bumped. He had no idea what to do with his hands, so they just sort of hovered awkwardly at his sides like useless appendages.

In PIDW, first kisses were described as *electric* and *world-shattering* and *igniting flames of passion that consumed all reason*. This was more like *mildly embarrassing* and *technically mouth-adjacent*.

But Binghe keened—a desperate, helpless sound. Something between a whimper and a prayer. His hands flew up to grip Shen Qingqiu's arms like he needed to anchor himself to something solid.

He swayed forward when Shen Qingqiu pulled back—chasing, instinctive—before catching himself. His eyes were blown wide, his lips still parted. He looked utterly shattered by a kiss that had barely qualified as one.

"Again." The word was barely audible. "Please—*please*, Shizun—"

"That was terrible," Shen Qingqiu said. "I missed. I literally missed your mouth."

"I don't care." Binghe's gaze found his, and his eyes were wet. Tears clung to his lashes—actual tears, from a single awkward kiss. "I don't care, please, I need—*again*—"

The raw urgency in his voice shot straight through Shen Qingqiu's chest and settled somewhere much lower.

He leaned back in. Slower this time. Giving himself a chance to actually aim properly, to pay attention to what he was doing instead of just panicking his way through it.

Their lips met.

Oh.

Binghe's mouth was soft. Warm. He kissed back with a kind of trembling reverence that made Shen Qingqiu's toes curl—not pushing, not demanding, just *receiving*. Like Shen Qingqiu was giving him something precious and he was terrified of breaking it.

All those PIDW scenes of the protagonist confidently conquering his wives—this was nothing like that. This was Luo Binghe shaking apart from a closed-mouth kiss, tears sliding down his cheeks, making small sounds every time Shen Qingqiu shifted against him.

When Shen Qingqiu let his lips part experimentally, Binghe *whimpered*.

"Good?" Shen Qingqiu murmured against his mouth.

"*Yes.*" Barely a breath. "Yes, I—more, please—"

Shen Qingqiu deepened the kiss. Let his tongue trace along Binghe's lower lip, testing.

The sound Binghe made in response should be illegal.

It was obscene—a broken moan that vibrated between them and made heat flood Shen Qingqiu's entire body. Binghe's hands finally found Shen Qingqiu's waist, gripping like he was afraid Shen Qingqiu would disappear if he didn't hold on, and the touch burned through the remaining layers like a brand.

When they broke apart, both of them were gasping.

"Shizun." Binghe's voice was ruined. Absolutely destroyed. "The rest of these robes—I still smell him on you and I *can't*—"

His hands were already at the ties of the middle layer, and he didn't wait for permission this time eithe —just pulled the ties loose and pushed the fabric off Shen Qingqiu's shoulders with frantic efficiency. It joined the ruined outer layer on the floor, and Binghe made a sound of satisfaction.

He immediately leaned in, pressing his face to Shen Qingqiu's throat, breathing deep against the thin silk of the inner robe.

"Much better." His mouth opened against Shen Qingqiu's neck—not quite a kiss, something more deliberate. More claiming. "I can smell *you* now. Underneath."

He pressed a kiss to Shen Qingqiu's pulse point. Lingering. *Marking*.

"Mine," he breathed there.

Lower, to the hollow of his throat.

"*Mine.*"

To the ridge of his collarbone, exposed where the silk had slipped.

"Mine."

Each word was a brand. Each kiss burned away what came before—the sandalwood, the borrowed clothes, the week of captivity. Replacing it all with *Binghe*.

"He thought he knew you." Binghe's voice had gone dangerous. "Tianlang-Jun. He watched you for a week and thought he understood."

His hands slid up Shen Qingqiu's sides, mapping the shape of him through the thin silk.

"A week of debates about array theory. A week of smiles over tea. A week of that—" A growl. "—that wrist-kissing trick that made you blush for him."

"Binghe—"

"I've watched you for *years*, Shizun." He pulled back just enough to meet Shen Qingqiu's eyes, and his expression was blazing. "I know that you hum when you think no one's listening. I know your hands shake after long calligraphy sessions, and you hide them in your sleeves so no one will notice. I know the exact way your breathing changes when Without a Cure is flaring—a catch, barely there, that no physician has ever noticed but I notice *every single time*."

His hands framed Shen Qingqiu's face.

"I know that you'll give endlessly but never ask for anything. So I learned to give without being asked—to bring tea at the right temperature, to adjust the cushions before you sit, to have medicine ready before you admit you're in pain."

"Binghe—" Shen Qingqiu's voice wasn't working properly.

"I know you refuse things." Quieter now. "Good things. Things you want. You push them away before anyone can offer them properly—or you convince yourself you don't deserve them at all."

Shen Qingqiu's throat closed up.

"But you can't refuse this." Binghe's eyes burned into his. "You can't convince yourself you don't deserve me—because I've already decided. I'm already yours. The only question is whether you'll let yourself *have* what's being offered."

The words landed somewhere deep in Shen Qingqiu's chest—in the place where he'd been hoarding all his secret wants, all the things he'd convinced himself weren't meant for people like him.

He wasn't wrong. Shen Qingqiu *did* refuse good things. Did push happiness away before it could be snatched from him. Did convince himself, over and over, that wanting was the same as losing.

But looking at Binghe now—at the fierce hope in his eyes, the restraint that cost him visibly, the years of devotion written in every line of his body—

He couldn't do it. Couldn't push this away. Couldn't convince himself he didn't want it.

"I'm not refusing," he heard himself say. "Binghe. I'm not—I *want*—"

The smile that broke across Binghe's face was blinding.

"I don't want just tonight, Shizun." The words poured out of him now, a dam finally breaking. His hands slid from Shen Qingqiu's face to his waist, pulling him closer—needing contact, needing *more*. "I don't want just two hours. I want every night. Every morning. Every moment until there's no one left who remembers a time when you weren't mine."

His thumbs traced along Shen Qingqiu's cheekbones, reverent and possessive at once.

This is actually happening, Shen Qingqiu thought, with a kind of dizzy, terrified wonder. *He's saying this to me. He means it. He means every word.*

"I want to be so written into you that the heavens themselves couldn't separate us. I want to ruin you for anyone else—not out of cruelty, but because I need—" His voice fractured. He pressed his forehead to Shen Qingqiu's, breathing hard. "I need to be the only one who knows what sounds you make. The only one who's felt you shake apart. The only one you think of when—"

"Please, Shizun. Tell me I can have that. Tell me this isn't just—just the seal, just—"

"It's not." Shen Qingqiu's hands found Binghe's face, mirroring his grip. "It's not just the seal. It's not necessity. I want this. I want *you*."

"You—" Binghe's breath shuddered. "Shizun—"

He leaned in, pressing their foreheads together.

"I'm yours, Binghe. I've been yours. Since before I understood what that meant."

The sound Binghe made was wounded. Wrecked.

"You're the reason I survived." The words shook out of Binghe. "The reason I became—everything I am. Every terrible thing I made myself into—it was for you. So I could be strong enough to protect you. So I could be worthy of this."

His hands slid into Shen Qingqiu's hair, tangling, holding.

"And now that I have you, Shizun, I will never let go."

He kissed Shen Qingqiu like he was sealing a vow.

This kiss was nothing like the tentative ones before.

This one was hungry. Consuming. Years of wanting finally given form. Binghe's hands tightened in Shen Qingqiu's hair, angling him exactly where he wanted, and his tongue slid past Shen Qingqiu's lips with a confidence that stole the breath from his lungs.

Oh, Shen Qingqiu thought distantly, *there's the protagonist.*

Because this—this was what the novel had always described. The overwhelming presence. The instinct that shouldn't be possible for someone who'd never done this before. The feeling of being consumed, devoured, claimed by someone who had decided you belonged to them and would not be convinced otherwise.

Except it was better than any novel could describe, because it was real.

Binghe's mouth left his only to trail across his jaw. Down his throat. Finding every sensitive spot with unerring precision—behind his ear, the dip of his collarbone, that place where his neck met his shoulder that made his whole body jerk.

"I know this body," Binghe murmured against his skin. "I've memorized every detail I could see. Every reaction I could catalogue. And now—"

He scraped his teeth along Shen Qingqiu's pulse point, and Shen Qingqiu heard himself make a sound he would absolutely deny later.

"Now I get to learn the rest."

"Binghe—"

"Every place that makes you shiver." A kiss to his collarbone. "Every place that makes you gasp." A press of lips to the hollow of his throat. "Every sound you make when you stop thinking and just *feel*."

Then Binghe pulled back.

His hands went to his own robes—what remained of them—and began pulling them off. Not with seduction. Not with any kind of artfulness. With the efficient, focused movements of a man removing an obstacle.

The outer robe went first—already more hole than fabric, it slid off his shoulders and pooled behind him on the bed like a shed skin. Then the next layer, or what was left of it. Binghe had to peel the damp silk away from his chest where it clung to sweat-slicked skin, and the wet sound it made as it pulled free did something unforgivable to Shen Qingqiu's composure.

Layer after ruined layer. He stripped them away with the same methodical intensity he brought to everything else—untying what could be untied, tearing what couldn't, tossing each piece aside without looking at where it fell. Until there was nothing left but the thin pants slung low on his hips, and an expanse of bare skin that went on for approximately forever.

And his *scent*.

It hit Shen Qingqiu like a wall. Without the robes containing it, Binghe's scent bloomed into the space between them—warm and sweet in a way that had no right to exist on a man who'd just torn his way through the most sophisticated spatial defenses in three realms. Something almost edible underneath the ozone and exertion. Dark honey, maybe. Or the way the air smelled after summer rain on hot stone. Rich and clean and so different from the sandalwood that had saturated Shen Qingqiu's every waking moment for the past week that his mouth actually watered.

A week of Tianlang-Jun's elegant, composed fragrance—carefully curated, deliberately applied, the olfactory equivalent of a chess move.

This was nothing like that. This was just *Binghe*—unfiltered, unperformed, pouring off heated skin like steam.

Shen Qingqiu's brain stopped.

He'd painted this body. Had spent hours rendering those shoulders, that chest, the defined lines of muscle that Airplane had described with approximately ten thousand variations of purple prose. He'd thought he'd known what to expect—had seen glimpses through the torn robes, had catalogued the shape of him in the careful, obsessive detail of his own brushstrokes.

He was wrong.

Because glimpses were nothing like *this*.

The seal marks curled across Binghe's torso in whorls of gold and crimson, tracing paths along his ribs, circling his navel, disappearing beneath the waistband that sat dangerously low on his hips—revealing the sharp jut of hip bones, the defined V of muscle leading downward, the dark trail of hair below his navel that Shen Qingqiu's paintings had never dared include. His chest rose and fell with unsteady breaths. In the low light, his skin seemed to glow.

Masculine perfection, Airplane had written. *Devastating physique. A form sculpted by the Abyss itself.*

Shen Qingqiu was going to write the man an apology letter. A formal one. With calligraphy.

Because the words hadn't captured this. The way the muscles of Binghe's stomach jumped when he noticed Shen Qingqiu staring. The way his body was somehow both powerful and vulnerable—built for destruction but trembling under Shen Qingqiu's gaze like the weight of it was almost too much to bear.

"Shizun." Binghe's voice was rough. "Touch me. Please."

Shen Qingqiu reached out.

His palm pressed flat against Binghe's chest, right over his heart, and the beat beneath was wild. Frantic. Nothing like the composure Luo Binghe projected to the rest of the world.

Then his fingers brushed raised skin.

Shen Qingqiu's hand stilled. A scar. Pale and silvered with age, but unmistakable—right where Xiu Ya had pierced through flesh and bone before Shen Qingqiu had sent him falling into the dark.

I did that.

The warm haze evaporated. Ice flooded his veins.

I stabbed him. I stabbed him and pushed him into the Abyss and he still has the scar, he'll always have the scar, what am I doing, what are we doing, how can he even stand to have me touch—

He jerked his hand back like he'd been burned.

Binghe caught it before it got far. Pressed it back against the scar, held it there.

"Shizun gave this to me." Quiet. Fierce. "Of course I kept it."

That's deranged, Shen Qingqiu thought, a little hysterically. *That is genuinely unhinged behavior.*

His eyes were burning anyway.

Beneath the scar, he could feel Binghe's heart pounding—frantic, almost violent, like it was trying to beat its way out of his chest and into Shen Qingqiu's hands.

"Feel that," Binghe breathed. "This is what you do to me. This is what you've always done to me."

"Every time Shizun smiled at me," he continued, voice rough, "every time your hand brushed mine when accepting tea, every time you looked at me and I thought—*maybe*—"

He guided Shen Qingqiu's hand lower. Down over his ribs. Across the plane of his stomach.

Oh.

The muscles jumped beneath his touch—defined ridges that contracted and shifted as Binghe's breath stuttered. Shen Qingqiu had painted these. Had spent hours trying to capture the way light and shadow would play across them. But paint couldn't capture *this*—warm skin over hard muscle, the way they tensed and released beneath his fingers like something alive.

The seal marks were warm under Shen Qingqiu's fingers—almost hot—and when his thumb brushed along the edge where they curved around Binghe's hip bone, Binghe's whole body shuddered.

"Lower," Binghe managed. "The—where the seal mark—*there*—"

Shen Qingqiu pressed against the skin just below his navel, where the patterns were densest, where they disappeared beneath the low waist of his pants.

Binghe's head fell back, a broken sound tearing from his throat.

"*Fuck*—Shizun—"

"Here?" Shen Qingqiu pressed again, watching Binghe's face. "You're sensitive here?"

"I'm—" Binghe laughed, and it sounded wrecked. "I'm sensitive everywhere you touch me."

He caught Shen Qingqiu's wrist and brought that hand up to his face. Pressed his lips against the center of Shen Qingqiu's palm.

"I learned my own body," he said against the skin. "Every sensitive place. Every reaction. Not for myself—for *you*. So when this moment came, I would know how to—"

His voice cracked.

"I practiced being gentle. Because I was so afraid—" A shuddering breath. "I was so afraid I would hurt you. That these hands—that they would forget how to be soft, and I would—"

"Binghe." Shen Qingqiu's chest hurt. Actually, physically hurt. "You're not going to hurt me."

"You don't know that."

"I do." He cupped Binghe's face with his other hand, making him look up. "I know exactly what these hands are capable of. I've watched you prepare medicine for me and adjust my blankets. I know."

Something in Binghe's expression gave way.

"Shizun." His voice was a wreck. "I need—please—*please* let me have you."

The words were a prayer. Raw and aching and pulled from somewhere so deep it must have been bleeding for years.

And finally—*finally*—Shen Qingqiu understood what this was.

This wasn't seduction. This wasn't the smooth, confident protagonist of PIDW who collected women like trophies. This was a man who had spent years waiting, wanting, *preparing*—who had kept himself untouched because his body was never his to give away, it was always meant for this, for *him*—

This was Luo Binghe, kneeling at the altar of everything he'd ever wanted, and asking permission to worship.

"Yes." The word came out hoarse. "Yes, Binghe. I'm yours."

The sound Binghe made wasn't human.

It was something between a sob and a growl, wrenched from somewhere primal, and then his hands were finally—*finally*—on Shen Qingqiu properly. Cradling his face like he was something infinitely precious. Thumbs tracing his cheekbones, his jaw, the curve of his lower lip.

"Mine," Binghe breathed. "You're—Shizun is—"

"Yours," Shen Qingqiu confirmed, and watched Binghe shatter.

Then Binghe was pressing him down into the silk sheets, covering him, surrounding him. His weight was grounding, warm, *right* in a way that Shen Qingqiu didn't know how to articulate. Bare skin against thin silk, heat bleeding through everywhere they touched.

Shen Qingqiu ran his hands down Binghe's back, feeling the way muscles contracted beneath warm skin—feeling him shiver at the touch, a full-body tremor that seemed to start where their skin met and radiate outward.

His fingers traced along Binghe's spine, counting each ridge of bone, each dip between vertebrae. *This is real. This is happening. This is real.*

"I'm going to ruin you," Binghe whispered against his mouth. "For anyone else. For anything else. I'm going to make sure that you think of me every time you close your eyes. Every time you—"

"Then do it." Shen Qingqiu pulled him down by the back of his neck. "Stop talking about it and *ruin me*, Binghe."

Something in Binghe's expression ignited.

"*Yes*, Shizun."

His mouth crashed back into Shen Qingqiu's, and it was—

It was everything.

It was years of longing finally given form. It was two people who had painted each other in secret finally allowed to touch. The two of them falling into each other like they were always meant to.

Shen Qingqiu's hands found Binghe's hair—that ridiculous, beautiful hair—and *pulled*.

The sound Binghe made went straight to the base of Shen Qingqiu's spine.

"*Shizun*—" Half growl, half sob. "When you do that I—"

"What?" Shen Qingqiu tugged again. "What happens when I—"

Binghe rolled his hips down, and Shen Qingqiu lost the ability to form words.

"That," Binghe breathed against his ear. "That happens. Do you feel what you do to me?"

Shen Qingqiu felt it. He felt *everything*. The weight of Binghe above him. The heat of bare skin. The hard evidence of exactly how affected he was pressing against Shen Qingqiu's thigh.

"Two hours," Binghe said, and his voice was a promise. A threat. A vow. "We have two hours, Shizun."

He pulled back just enough to look at Shen Qingqiu's face—flushed, disheveled, utterly wrecked—and his smile was blinding.

Devastating.

Victorious.

"I'll make you feel every minute."

[fade to black]

Chapter 23: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sometime later, they did, in fact, save the world.

The details were almost anticlimactic after everything that came before. Luo Binghe, newly unsealed and riding the high of finally—*finally*—having his Shizun, was unstoppable. The dual cultivation hadn't just broken the seal and cured Without a Cure. It had done something to his demonic energy, concentrated it, made it *more* in a way that shouldn't have been possible according to any cultivation manual Shen Qingqiu had ever read.

(Shang Qinghua, when pressed, had muttered something about "quality over quantity" and "emotional resonance amplification" and "look, I didn't write this part, okay, this is completely off-script" before burying his face in his hands.)

Xin Mo, traitor that it was, had taken one look at Luo Binghe's new energy signature and decided it was done with Tianlang-Jun. The sword practically leaped into Binghe's hands, purring like a cat that had finally found the sunny spot it had been looking for.

Tianlang-Jun, stripped of his weapon and half his power, had lasted approximately four more minutes.

He'd fought, of course. Had pulled power from somewhere—ancient reserves, sheer stubbornness, the kind of desperate strength that came from having nothing left to lose. There was a moment, near the end, when his eyes had met Shen Qingqiu's across the battlefield. No accusation in them. No pleading. Just a strange, quiet recognition—the look of a man watching the ending he'd known was coming since he saw his son's face and understood.

Ah, that look said. *So this is how it goes.*

He'd smiled. Then Luo Binghe's blade found its mark, and Tianlang-Jun fell.

He wasn't dead. Shen Qingqiu had been surprised to discover he was relieved about that.

Tianlang-Jun was currently sealed in his own estate—the spatial distortions he'd so proudly designed, that Luo Binghe had torn through and left in tatters, now painstakingly rebuilt into the most elegant prison in existence. Shen Qingqiu had designed the new array structure himself, because if anyone was going to trap a genius who had spent a week praising his intellect, it was going to be *done properly*. Luo Binghe had used Xin Mo to collapse the exit points and reinforce the dimensional boundaries until not even their creator could find a flaw to exploit.

"Poetic," Tianlang-Jun had remarked, when they'd deposited him back in his garden. He hadn't even seemed angry. Just... tired. And perhaps a little amused. "Caged by my own design and your corrections. I should appreciate the craftsmanship."

"Your energy flow was inefficient," Shen Qingqiu said stiffly. "I fixed it."

"You always do."

There was a pause. The garden was quiet—those impossible flowers still blooming, the air still carrying that faint scent of sandalwood that Shen Qingqiu suspected he would never smell again without something complicated twisting in his chest.

"The library stays," Shen Qingqiu said. He hadn't planned to say it. Hadn't planned to offer anything at all.

Binghe's hand tightened on his waist.

Tianlang-Jun's eyebrows rose. Something shifted in his expression—surprise, then understanding, then something softer that he covered quickly with a sardonic smile.

"Careful, Shen Qingqiu. A man might think you cared."

"A man might think you deserved something to read besides your own walls."

The smile that crossed Tianlang-Jun's face was the most genuine Shen Qingqiu had seen from him—not a performance, not a seduction. Just a tired, ancient being who had lost everything and was being offered one small kindness by someone who understood what it meant to be alone with your own thoughts.

"I'll compose my critiques," Tianlang-Jun said. "Perhaps I'll write them in the margins. Give you something to argue with when you visit."

"I won't be visiting."

"No," Tianlang-Jun agreed, looking at the way Binghe was holding Shen Qingqiu. "I don't suppose you will."

He turned away then, toward his garden. Paused.

"Be happy, little Seer." Quiet. No artifice left. "Be happy with the one you chose."

Shen Qingqiu didn't answer. But he didn't look away either—not until Tianlang-Jun had walked into the garden alone, his silver-streaked hair catching the light, the door closing behind him for the last time.

(The man appreciated good array theory. It felt wrong to leave him with nothing. Even if he had tried to destroy the world. Even if Shen Qingqiu was still trying not to think about palm kisses and parting words and *I would have moved mountains to earn even one of your smiles*.)

The realms did not merge. Reality stitched itself back together. The peak lords went home to write very confused reports.

The cultivation world's reaction to recent events was, in Shang Qinghua's professional assessment, "a dumpster fire of truly historic proportions."

The *facts*, as far as the sects understood them: Shen Qingqiu, Peak Lord of Qing Jing, had been kidnapped by an ancient demon emperor. The same demon emperor turned out to be the father of the *new* demon emperor—Luo Binghe, formerly believed to be Shen Qingqiu's dead disciple, currently very much alive and in possession of the most powerful demonic sword in existence. Luo Binghe had torn through said ancient demon emperor's defenses, defeated him, and reclaimed his Shizun.

The *interpretation* of these facts varied wildly depending on which faction you asked.

The "demonic seduction conspiracy" faction maintained that Shen Qingqiu had been targeted by *two* demon lords—father and son—as part of a coordinated plot to destabilize Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. They viewed Shen Qingqiu as a victim of demonic manipulation and demanded increased sect defenses. They also filed three separate formal complaints about his "continued association with known demonic entities," which Yue Qingyuan had quietly buried under a stack of unrelated paperwork.

The "Demon's Beloved" faction—the romantics—had only grown more fervent. Shen Qingqiu's kidnapping and dramatic rescue had confirmed every tragic love story they'd been writing. A demon lord *and* his estranged son, fighting over one mortal cultivator? The illustrated editions of the love letters had gone through a second printing. Someone had composed a ballad. It was performed at three separate sect gatherings before Luo Binghe heard about it and the composer abruptly decided to pursue a career in farming.

The "Shen Qingqiu is just incredibly slutty" faction had technically disbanded after the full story came to light, but Shen Qingqiu suspected several of its former members had simply migrated to the Demon's Beloved camp with their theories intact.

And then there was the new faction—the one that had formed *after* the resolution, when word got out that Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe were now officially... whatever they were. This faction didn't have a catchy name yet, but their position could be summarized as: *we always knew the teacher-student thing was sus and we were RIGHT.*

"The forbidden romance faction," Shang Qinghua reported, with the relish of a man delivering intelligence he found deeply entertaining. "Fastest growing demographic. They're merging with the Demon's Beloved crowd. Someone's written a forty-chapter retelling."

"Forty chapters," Shen Qingqiu repeated flatly.

"With illustrations."

"Of *course* with illustrations."

The Seer revelation, at least, had been contained. Yue Qingyuan, Mu Qingfang, and Liu Qingge knew—they'd had to be told *something* to explain the Tianlang-Jun situation and the array designs. Shang Qinghua had crafted the cover story with his usual talent for plausible deniability: Shen Qingqiu possessed rare prophetic abilities that occasionally granted him

knowledge of future events, a gift he had understandably kept private due to the political complications such abilities would invite.

It was close enough to the truth to hold up under scrutiny and vague enough to discourage follow-up questions. Mu Qingfang had accepted it with the quiet pragmatism of a man who had seen stranger things in his medical career. Liu Qingge had grunted once and never brought it up again.

Yue Qingyuan had looked at Shen Qingqiu for a long, quiet moment—the kind of look that suggested he understood more than he was letting on, or at least understood that there was *more* to understand—and said simply, "If you ever wish to explain further, this shixiong will listen."

Shen Qingqiu had not explained further. But the offer sat warm in his chest, alongside all the other things he was still learning to accept.

The fake love letters, mercifully, were eventually tracked down and destroyed. Shang Qinghua had taken personal responsibility for hunting down every copy—though not before thoroughly documenting which sects had been passing them around and making extensive notes about "faction dynamics" and "information flow patterns."

"This is valuable intelligence," he'd said, when Shen Qingqiu had caught him looking far too entertained. "I'm doing research."

"You're enjoying this."

"I can do both."

Shen Qingqiu didn't ask how many copies there had been. He didn't want to know.

(Rumor had it that Yue Qingyuan had personally incinerated a stack of them with extreme prejudice. Shen Qingqiu chose to believe this was out of respect for his martial brother's dignity and not because he'd actually read them.)

And Luo Binghe carried Shen Qingqiu back to the bamboo house and refused to let him out of arm's reach for approximately two weeks.

Literally carried. Bridal style. Through a portal he opened directly into the bedroom, because apparently walking was for people who hadn't just reclaimed their Shizun from a romantic rival who didn't actually exist.

"I can walk," Shen Qingqiu had protested. Weakly. Very weakly.

"Shizun is still recovering," Binghe had said, in a tone that brooked no argument. "Shizun needs rest. Shizun needs to be taken care of."

Shizun, apparently, also needed to be hand-fed, bathed, dressed, and generally treated like a particularly precious invalid for the foreseeable future. Shen Qingqiu's protests grew increasingly half-hearted as the days wore on.

(The food was very good. The baths were very warm. The company was... well.)

It was on the third morning that Shen Qingqiu noticed.

He woke slowly—which was unusual in itself, because Without a Cure had trained him into a light sleeper, always braced for the next flare, always half-aware of the low hum of poison in his meridians. He'd lived with it so long he'd stopped registering it as pain, the way you stopped hearing a sound that never ceased.

But the sound had ceased.

He lay still for a long moment, taking stock. Binghe was warm against his back, one arm slung heavy across his waist. Morning light filtered through the window screens. Birds were doing something unnecessarily cheerful outside.

And his meridians were... quiet.

Not suppressed. Not managed. Not the temporary reprieve of Mu Qingfang's treatments or the brief relief of demonic energy transfer. Just—*quiet*. The way they must have felt before the poison, in the life before this life, when breathing didn't require a constant background calculation of *how much does this hurt right now* and *can I hide it*.

Shen Qingqiu breathed in. Deep. Deeper than he'd breathed in years, filling his lungs completely without the catch, without the brace.

Nothing hurt.

He breathed out. His eyes stung.

Nothing hurt.

Behind him, Binghe stirred. His arm tightened, nose pressing into the back of Shen Qingqiu's neck—that same spot, the gap between collar and hairline, as if even in sleep his body remembered where it belonged.

"Shizun?" Sleep-rough. Barely awake. "Is something—"

"It's gone," Shen Qingqiu said. His voice came out strange. "Binghe. It's gone."

A pause. Then Binghe went very still.

"...The poison?"

"I can't feel it. I can't—" He pressed his hand to his own chest, searching for the familiar ache. Finding nothing. "It's just *gone*."

The sound Binghe made was small. Wounded. He buried his face against Shen Qingqiu's spine, and his shoulders shook.

"You're crying," Shen Qingqiu said, which was a deeply unhelpful observation given that his own eyes were not exactly dry.

"Shizun has been in pain," Binghe said, muffled against his back, "every day, for *years*, because of me. Because I wasn't strong enough to protect—"

"Because I chose to step between you and a demon who wanted you dead." Shen Qingqiu rolled over, facing him. Binghe's face was wet, his eyes red, his hair a disaster. "I chose that, Binghe. And I'd choose it again."

"You almost died."

"I lived. We both lived." He pressed his palm flat against Binghe's chest—right over the scar, right where his heartbeat hammered. "And now it doesn't hurt anymore."

Binghe's hand came up to cover his. Held it there.

They stayed like that for a long time, breathing together in the quiet morning, while outside the birds continued to be unnecessarily cheerful and the world continued to not end.

Later, Binghe made breakfast. Shen Qingqiu watched him from the bed—watched those hands that had torn through barriers and broken seals and killed without hesitation crack an egg one-handed with absolute precision. Watched him adjust the heat under the pan with the same careful attention he'd once given to adjusting Shen Qingqiu's blankets. Watched his fingers curl around a teacup—*Shen Qingqiu's* teacup—with a gentleness that looked effortless.

It wasn't effortless. Shen Qingqiu knew that now.

I practiced being gentle.

Those hands had learned softness the hard way—through repetition, through discipline, through the same stubborn devotion that Binghe brought to everything he did.

Shen Qingqiu watched Binghe set a plate down in front of him—all his favorites, arranged with the artistry of someone who treated every meal like a small act of worship—and thought: *You learned to be gentle for me. You learned to be gentle, and then you made it look like it was nothing.*

"Shizun is staring," Binghe said, not looking up from the tea he was pouring.

"Shizun is assessing the quality of service."

"And?"

Shen Qingqiu picked up his chopsticks. "Adequate," he said, in a tone that meant *perfect, as always, and I will never deserve you.*

Binghe smiled like he'd heard both.

The paintings did not stay secret.

Shen Qingqiu had hoped—naively, in retrospect—that maybe they could just... not talk about the years of artwork. That it could remain a private thing, acknowledged between them but not advertised to the world.

Luo Binghe had other ideas.

"They should be displayed," he said, with the air of someone stating an obvious fact. "Shizun worked so hard on them. They deserve to be seen."

"Absolutely not."

"In our rooms at the palace. And at Qing Jing Peak."

"Binghe."

"I've already had frames commissioned."

"*Binghe.*"

It was a losing battle. Within a month, Luo Binghe had divided the collection between their two homes with the strategic precision of a military campaign. The palace got the dramatic pieces—Binghe in armor, Binghe wreathed in demonic energy, Binghe looking imperious and untouchable. The bamboo house got the softer ones. The quiet moments. The study of Binghe sleeping on the porch with his hair unbound—the one Shen Qingqiu had painted from memory one restless night when the bamboo house felt too quiet, when the only sound was the echo of a disciple who wasn't there anymore.

That one, Binghe hung directly across from their bed. So it would be the first thing Shen Qingqiu saw every morning.

"You painted me," he'd murmur, pulling Shen Qingqiu closer. "*All this time.* You were painting me."

And Shen Qingqiu, who had spent so long hiding behind fans and deflection and carefully maintained distance, would pull him close and think: *Yes. It was always you. It was only ever you.*

The peak lords who visited Qing Jing Peak learned very quickly not to comment on the artwork. Liu Qingge had made the mistake of asking about them exactly once. The resulting expression on Luo Binghe's face—smug, possessive, and deeply unsettling—had convinced him to never mention it again.

Mobei-Jun, for his part, said nothing about the artwork at all.

He did, however, start asking Shang Qinghua if he had any hobbies.

"Why does he want to know if I keep a journal?" Shang Qinghua had hissed during one of his visits, looking hunted. "Why did he ask if I *draw*? Is this a trap? Am I being investigated?"

Shen Qingqiu had taken a long sip of tea and offered no assistance whatsoever.

(He had his suspicions about Mobei-Jun. He also had no desire to get involved in whatever disaster was brewing between those two. Shang Qinghua had created this mess—in multiple senses of the word—and he could figure it out himself.)

The alcove stayed.

Shen Qingqiu had considered sealing it. The hidden room behind the bookshelf in the bamboo house—the one that had started all of this, the secret space where he'd spent years painting a man he couldn't have and telling himself it was just a hobby—had no reason to exist anymore. The art was out. The secret was known. The bookshelf could go back to being a bookshelf.

But when he'd stood in front of it, hand on the mechanism, he couldn't do it.

Binghe had found him there. Had stood in the doorway of the alcove and looked at the empty walls where the paintings used to hang—bare now, just stone and lamplight and the faint smell of ink that had seeped into the rock over years of use.

"This is where you painted me," Binghe said. Not a question.

"This is where I hid," Shen Qingqiu corrected quietly.

Binghe had stepped inside. Run his fingers along the wall where the largest painting had hung—the one of his demon emperor form, the first one Shen Qingqiu had ever made, back when he'd still been able to pretend it was just artistic appreciation of a fictional character.

"You don't need to hide anymore, Shizun."

"I know."

"But you want to keep the room."

Shen Qingqiu had looked at the empty easel. The jars of pigment still lined up along the back wall. The stone floor worn smooth in the spot where he'd knelt for years, grinding ink and mixing colors and pouring everything he couldn't say into brushstrokes.

"It's a good studio," he said finally. "The light is terrible, but the acoustics are decent and no one bothers me here."

Binghe's smile could have lit the room without a single lamp.

The alcove became a studio. An *open* studio—the bookshelf stayed pulled back, the mechanism disabled, the hidden door left permanently ajar. Binghe wandered in and out freely. Brought tea. Sat in the corner and read while Shen Qingqiu worked, radiating the particular contentment of a man who had been given everything he'd ever wanted and intended to stay exactly where he was until the sun burned out.

It was a different kind of painting now. The subjects were smaller—studies of light on bamboo, ink experiments, the occasional landscape that wasn't half bad when he stopped overthinking it. Nothing like the years of obsessive devotion that had filled the walls before. Nothing secret. Nothing desperate.

The room smelled the same—ink and stone and the faint mineral tang of ground pigment. But the silence in it had changed. It used to be the silence of hiding. Now it was just quiet. The comfortable kind, with Binghe's breathing and the rustle of pages and the occasional soft clink of a teacup being set down.

Sometimes Shen Qingqiu would look up from his work and find Binghe watching him—not the painting, *him*—with an expression so openly, devastatingly fond that Shen Qingqiu had to look away first.

"Stop that," he'd say.

"Stop what?"

"Looking at me like that."

"Like what, Shizun?"

Like Shen Qingqiu was the artwork worth studying. Like the hidden room and everything it contained had only ever mattered because it proved that someone had loved Luo Binghe long before Luo Binghe had dared to hope he was lovable.

"Like *that*," Shen Qingqiu would mutter, and go back to his painting, and not move away when Binghe's shoulder settled warm against his.

The misunderstanding about Tianlang-Jun became a private joke between them—one that made Luo Binghe's eyes go dark and possessive whenever it came up, which Shen Qingqiu definitely did not find attractive. (He did. He absolutely did. He was a weak, weak man.)

"Shizun," Binghe would say, pressing him into the nearest flat surface, "tell me again who those paintings were of."

"You," Shen Qingqiu would manage, because Binghe's hands were already doing something very distracting and coherent speech was becoming an increasingly ambitious goal. "It was always—*ah*—always you—"

"And who does Shizun belong to?"

Obviously, he belonged to Luo Binghe. Completely. Embarrassingly. Without reservation.

And Luo Binghe belonged to him.

Not the protagonist he'd obsessed over in another life—the beautiful, tragic character whose suffering had made a lonely man furious enough to read four million words and fill an alcove

with paintings. Not the idea of Binghe that had sustained him through years of careful distance and elaborate denial.

The *person*. The one who snored faintly when he slept on his left side and didn't know it. Who argued with vendors at the market over the freshness of their ginger with the same intensity he'd once brought to conquering the demon realm. Who still, after everything—after the Abyss, after the misunderstandings, after thwarting an apocalypse, and all the rest of it—looked at Shen Qingqiu sometimes like he couldn't quite believe he was allowed to be this close.

That was the version Shen Qingqiu loved. Not the fantasy. The man who existed only when you were standing right next to him.

It was more than fine. It was everything Shen Qingqiu had never let himself hope for.

He remembered a night in a borrowed room, wearing borrowed robes, pressing his hand to a mirror and reaching for someone he couldn't see. Choosing the frightening thing over the safe thing. The unknown over the known. A single devastating kiss in a prison cell over a life he could already see the shape of—not because it was rational, not because the odds were good, but because his hand wouldn't leave the glass.

He'd been so afraid. Had stood in that room with a moth circling the lamp and his heart in his throat and thought: *I might reach for him and find nothing reaching back.*

This was what had been reaching back. *This.* Breakfast and morning light and a devoted man who made gentleness look effortless. A life so quiet and so full that some mornings Shen Qingqiu woke up and forgot to be afraid at all.

The scary unknown thing, it turned out, was just *this*.

He was going to need at least a year to process that. Possibly longer. Possibly forever.

But for now—for now there was the bamboo house and the morning light and Binghe's ridiculous, beautiful hair spread across the pillow beside him.

There was Binghe, warm and real and *his*, looking at him the way he always had—like Shen Qingqiu was the only thing in any realm worth seeing.

Some gifts, Shen Qingqiu had once decided, were best accepted without examination.

He'd been wrong about that. This gift deserved to be examined thoroughly. Turned over in the light. Appreciated in every detail.

Held close, and never let go.

If, sometime later, a visitor from another dimension happened to stumble upon those paintings and draw his own conclusions—and if Luo Binghe, faced with a crueler mirror of himself, drew conclusions of his own—

Well. That's another story entirely.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap on the main story!

Thank you SO MUCH to everyone who came on this journey with me. What started as "lol what if Binghe saw fan art and invented a guy to be jealous of" turned into... whatever this beautiful disaster became. I'm still not entirely sure how we got here, but I'm so glad we did. Couldn't have gotten this far without you all!

Here's what I've got planned next:

- **The TLJ alternate ending story "Shadows of the Heart: In Another Life"** is currently in progress
- **A sequel story to the TLJ alternate ending:** because I couldn't let LBH be sad
- **The Bingge tease:** Yes, I plan to write this too

When I posted this story, I did it anonymously. It was my first time writing in this fandom and I genuinely wasn't sure how it would land. And then it turned into a whole thing that I did not see coming when I posted chapter one.

Thank you for every kudos, comment, and bookmark on this fic. Genuinely. This story exists in the world because you made it feel safe to leave it here.

If you want to give me a little extra love beyond kudos, a follow on Instagram would help support me IRL:
@amolaw.legacyplanning

And if you want to support me beyond kudos — I've published a nonfiction estate planning guide that uses fandom references to make an intimidating legal topic actually approachable. It's my version of putting something I love into a format that might genuinely help people. (There's an actual chapter called #FoundFamily).
If you're curious, you can find it here:
Your After-Credits Scene

No pressure on any of that. Just — thank you. Thank you for making this little corner of fandom feel like somewhere worth showing up. 💛

And thank you so much for every kudos, every comment, every keyboard smash and every tear you shed for these ridiculous disasters. You made this story what it is!

Until next time!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!